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転生したら

棚架ユウ

イラスト／るろお

"I became the sword by transmigrating"
Story by Yuu Tanaka, Illustration by Ito

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I Was a Sword When I Reincarnated

– Tensei Shitara Ken Deshita –

- Volume 4 -

**-Author-
Tanaka Yu**

**-Artist-
Ruroo**

[CardboardTL]

Chapter 141

Ulmutt's Entrance

It took us four days to get from Barbra to Ulmutt.

Nothing really happened along the way. The only event worth mentioning was us stumbling across a goblin's nest containing 20 odd individuals, but cleaning that up took us less than half an hour, so it honestly was rather insignificant.

It turned out that Ulmutt was much smaller a city than I'd been expecting it to be. I mean, I knew for a fact that it'd be smaller than Barbra, but it turned out that it was actually way smaller than Alessa too. In fact, it was less than half Alessa's size.

That said though, it'd still left quite an impression on me even from the very moment I first caught sight of it. Our approach included Urushi carrying us on his back while running through the sky as usual, so I ended up getting a birds eye view of the city. Said view allowed me to fully understand just how weird Ulmutt's layout really was.

Most of the weirdness stemmed from the two large constructions that had immediately grabbed my attention. The first was the massive wall that ran all around the city's borders. It was just as tall as Barbra's, but much wider. It honestly looked extremely out of place, and almost entirely unnecessary.

The second was the enormous cylindrical structure that almost seemed to loom over the city in its entirety. I mean, I totally could've rationalized it as a fortress meant for the sake of defense had it been located outside the city's perimeter, but it wasn't. Hence, I could only assume that it to be some sort of shelter or facility.

[Oh well, we'll figure out what it is if we just head over or something later.]

"Nn"

"Woof."

The only issue with said suggestion was that getting into the city seemed like a huge

pain in the ass in and of itself.

There were around a thousand people lined up before Ulmutt's gates. It seemed that the city's main entrance was being swarmed by adventurers, spectators, and merchants alike as a result of the upcoming martial arts tournament.

Honestly, I thought the crowd to be justified seeing how the tournament was known as one of the kingdom's biggest events.

We got off Urushi's back at a spot a bit away from the crowd before moving towards the line and joining it — only to find out that the line basically wasn't moving at all.

I overheard the merchants standing in front of us saying that it was a difficult to be admitted into the city if it was your first time there unless you were an adventurer. Ulmutt contained two different dungeons, so they'd pretty much interrogate everyone that wished to enter about their intentions at the admissions gate.

Anyone that's been admitted once would then be granted a pass that'd allow them to freely enter and exit the city over the course of the next half year. It also allowed use of the less crowded non-admissions entrances. The martial arts competition was an annual event, so people that came solely for its sake would end up having to sit through the line every single year.

The people that came every year more or less regarded lining up as an annual tradition. Some of the more aggressive merchants would even intentionally target those waiting in line through the sale of refreshments. Some of these refreshments had come in the form of booze; several groups of people had already sat themselves down in order to engage in drinking contests and the like.

Seeing these sights reminded me of comiket and the other conventions we had back in Japan. As a result, I couldn't shake the feeling that the event would end up starting before we actually managed to get ourselves admitted. ^[1]

It seemed I wasn't the only one that felt that way, as some of the other individuals in line appeared simply incapable of waiting any longer. Most of these individuals were commoners or adventurers like us who were visiting the city for the first time.

The most agitated group of all was composed specifically of adventurers with a less than refined appearance. They were getting into arguments here and there. There'd

yet to be any violence, but I felt as if a brawl could break out at any given moment.

Goddammit. Do those idiots not realize that they're just making this whole line move even more slowly than usual?

Our gazes turned cold as we continued to observe them while patiently awaiting our turn.

[Goblin.]

(Ogre.)

[Hmnm... Dragon.]

(Kobald.)

[Uhhh one sec... Uhhhhhh, demon.]

(Chimera.)

[Hmnm]

Fran and I were killing time by engaging ourselves in games that could be played anywhere at any time. Specifically, we were currently taking turns listing off monsters whilst trying to be the last one to be able to name one.

However, said game of ours was ultimately brought to an abrupt end. And annoyingly enough, not because it'd finally become our turn.

"Hey you, brat. Get over here."

A bearded adventurer called us over in a cocky tone. I took a quick glance at his stats, only to find that they were abysmal. He was probably an E ranker at best.

"..."

"Oi! Listen to me, you goddamn brat!"

"..."

“Bastard, think you’re tough shit for ignoring me, huh?”

“ ... ”

Fran didn’t respond to the adventurer at all, as she was too busy trying to think up a monster to name. The man’s face had rapidly reddened as a result.

(Hmmmm...)

[Hey Fran.]

(Nn? Master, giving up?)

[Nah, it’s just that there’s someone trying to get your attention.]

“Nn?”

The adventurer immediately started yelling at Fran as if to intimidate her the moment she turned towards him.

“I was thinking of allowing you to pour me booze once we made our way over the wall, but there ain’t no forgiving you now, brat!”

“Shut up.”

“The fuck you say!? You trying mess with me!?”

Fran had flattened her ears and muttered under her breath because of how much of a pain in the ass the guy was being, but, that only seemed to fuel his rage further.

“I’ll be making you pay for this!”

The bearded man immediately threw a punch in our direction. Is he stupid? Like, look at how many witnesses there are. Wait, does he have the ability to shut everyone up or something? Could he perhaps be related to one of Ulmutt’s more influential figures?

“Nn.”

I was a bit concerned about the man's identity, but Fran honestly couldn't care less.

She slipped right by his attack and smashed her own fist straight into his solar plexus. The onlookers had probably initially thought it to be a rather insignificant action. In fact, many seemed to suspect that that the man wouldn't suffered even the slightest bit of damage from the attack, but they were immediately proven wrong and forced to doubt their own eyes.

"Guah!"

The man flew five meters before finally landing back on the ground. The force of the impact had caused him to keep rolling even afterwards.

[Did you not hold back?]

(Enemy too weak so didn't use Master.)

"Guueeeeeee..."

The man lay twitching as both his blood and the contents of his last meal leaked from his throat. I mean, he did kind of deserve it given he just tried to hit a little girl. He's lucky he didn't get all sliced up and stuff instead.

But naturally, there existed opinions that differed from our own.

"Hey, Brulace, you alright!?"

"The hell did you do to him you goddamn brat!?"

"Yo, that was way too over the top. The hell man!?"

Brulace's companions yelled at Fran in rage. It seemed that they wanted a go as well.

Their reddened faces gave way to the fact that they were all drunk. Brulace had been the same, hence his overly quick temper. That said, it wasn't like we were planning to be all kind and forgiving just because they happened to be under the influence.

Fran immediately disarmed them and sent them flying in the exact same manner as she had Brulace.

“Ugeehh”

“Uuuueeeeeee”

I mean, we were kind of the reason they ended up barfing, but I couldn't help but feel that all four men looked way too gross for comfort. The other people in line seemed to feel the same, as they looked upon the men with eyes of disgust whilst taking a few steps away from them.

Whooops. Turned out we were the first to resort to violence.

Hmm, maybe we should clean all this up?

An older man approached us as we contemplated how we could best address the issue.

“Wow, that was impressive. You seem pretty strong.”

He was quite dandy looking, and probably a noble. The clothes he wore were gaudy; they were heavily embroidered and seemed luxurious even from a glance. His whitened hair was arranged in a swept back manner. His beard, which of course was of the same colour, had been cut to resemble something along the lines of a goatee. Though he seemed to be at least sixty years of age, his body was still so well balanced that it verged on being abnormal. All in all, he seemed to give off the air of an experienced warrior.

I found it a bit weird for him to be happily smiling at and talking to us given the status quo. My guess was that he either had balls of steel or simply couldn't read the mood.

“My name is Dias. What's yours?”

“Fran.”

“Are you an adventurer?”

“Nn.”

“I see. You seem quite promising based on how cute and strong you are. I look forward to seeing how you'll develop going forward.”

Hmmm, just who is this old man? He doesn't seem to be hostile, and he doesn't seem to be trying to evaluate Fran or anything like that either.

I mean, my first impression was that he was probably some sort of noble, but he didn't give his family name when he introduced himself, so he probably either wasn't one, or belonged to a family too famous for him to want to name himself.

I wanted to appraise him, but, didn't actually get to. I was instead distracted by the fact that I happened to see a group of guards run over to us from the gate.

"Hey, you, kid."

The guard's tone was a rather threatening one. It seemed like we wouldn't be able to get ourselves out of this one just by claiming self defense. It might work out if the people around us help testify though...

That said, it didn't seem like anyone wanted to give us a hand. They all immediately averted their gazes the moment Fran looked towards them, as if to signify that they wanted to stay out of the situation given how troublesome it was.

"Geez, why'd you have to go and stir up trouble like that?"

"We're already busy enough as is."

"To the guard's room with you. We'll listen to what you have to say once we get there."

"Come on, let's go."

We'd already spent an hour in line. It'd really suck if they sent us to the back again afterwards.

The guards sure did seem to be in a bad mood though. The glances they shot in Fran's direction were totally cold. I wouldn't be surprised if they ended up just locking us up without actually listening to us.

What I didn't understand was why they only took us and not the people Fran had hit.

I really didn't wanted to deal with all this, but it wasn't like we could just say screw it

and leave. Luckily, Dias stopped the guards right as Fran resigned herself to follow them.

“Hold on. None of what’d happened was actually her fault at all.”

“Okay and? Who the hell are you?”

One of the guards glared at Dias in a rather stuck up manner.

[It looks like this might lead to even more trouble.]

Or so I thought, but apparently not.

“M-Master Dias!”

“W-Whatever might you be doing in a place like this?”

“Oh, you know, I just happened to be passing by.”

Huh, looked like that old man had quite a bit of influence. Looks like he really might be a noble after all.

“Understood sir.”

“As I was saying, she wasn’t at fault at all. All the fault lies with the men collapsed over there, so if you want to be taking anyone away, it should be them. I know they’re filthy, and I do feel bad for you because of it, but you will be taking them in regardless, right?”

“Y-Yessir!”

Ah, I see now. The guards hadn’t wanted to carry off four dirty ass men, so they’d decided to try targeting Fran instead. They might’ve even ended up wronging her as a result, so I do feel fairly thankful for Dias’ actions.

Dias’ words had inspired the guards to immediately bring all four men to their feet and take them away in earnest.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t sweat it. Seeing how promising an adventurer you are just happened to make me feel like keeping you out of trouble is all.”

“Why?”

“Hahaha. Anyways, I’ll be off now. See you around.”

Dias dipped after leaving us with a few words that seemed to be hinting at something. Just who the hell was he? I guess we’ll probably end up finding out when get inside the city.

“Bored.”

[Me too.]

It looked like we’d still have to wait for quite some time before finally being allowed into the city’s walls.

[Whoops. I just realized I totally forgot to appraise him.]

Chapter 142

Bardiche? Sorry, I Meant Erza

We finally made our way through the city's gates about an hour after meeting Dias.

I quickly looked around, only to find that, the massive, towering, cylindrical building aside, the city was actually surprisingly normal. In fact, seeing it reminded me of Alessa.

[Let's start off by checking out the Adventurer's Guild.]

"Nn."

We needed to sell the few materials we happened across on the way here and get ourselves a bit more info about the city's two dungeons.

One important fact to note was that not just anyone could just head over to the dungeon and hit it up. You'd need permission and whatnot first. I figured we'd be fine though. Alessa's Guildmaster, Klimut, had given us a permit ahead of time so we probably wouldn't run into any major issues.

Finding the guild ended up being a relatively simple task. We managed to catch sight of it after asking people for directions and walking around for 10 odd minutes. The guild's building was a fairly large one, which did make sense given that the city contained two dungeons.

[The doors sure are wide, huh?]

"Nn. About same as Barbra."

"Woof."

Barbra's guild was quite a bit taller, but Ulmutt's looked like it was built atop a bigger plot of land.

Entering the building made me realize just how large it really was. There were twenty different counters, and the adventurers that sought service from them were in such excess that they had to form lines.

[Holy crap, this place is just bustling with life. It's even more lively than Barbra's branch.]

"Nn. Amazed."

"Woof."

Wow, there sure are a lot of adventurers. I thought Barbra was crowded, but holy crap Ulmutt takes it to a whole new level. I mean, it makes sense given the dungeons and whatnot, but still, wow.

Fran immediately moved to the line with the least people in it. The man in front of us turned around in response. Is someone seriously about to pick a fight with us already?

I position myself to "accidentally slip out of my sheath" at any given moment.

"Just so you know, this line's only supposed to be for E rankers."

Turned out he was just bringing it to our attention that we might be in the wrong place.

The man briefed us on how things were organised. There were five different types of lines, each of which had four corresponding counters. The first four types were for G, F, E, and D ranked adventurers respectively, whereas the last handled everyone that ranked in at C or higher.

Fran moved over one line after hearing him out.

"Oh come on, listen to me goddamit. That one's supposed to be for D rankers."

"Nn?"

"I literally just told you you're not supposed to use that line unless you're a D ranked adventurer."

You know, the dude who called out to us looked all intimidating and stuff, but he was

actually a pretty nice guy. I mean, he did make light of Fran's abilities and all that, but it wasn't like he did out of malice or anything. He'd only called out to her in the first place in order to patiently instruct on something he realized she didn't know.

I had a feeling that this was just how things tended to be in Ulmutt. There were quite a few other younger individuals lined up around us as well, though Fran was still definitely the youngest of them all. Most of the younger crowd seemed to be about 15 years old, and there were far more of them than there were back in Alessa.

"That's why this line."

"Huh?"

"Currently D ranked."

"Whaaat?"

Her proclamation seemed to have surprised not only the man that'd been giving her advice, but also the adventurers around us as well. Many had turned their heads in disbelief.

"Here."

Fran showed the man her guild card and immediately caused his eyes to widen in shock.

"The guild card says... it's true... Wait, what? You're higher ranked than me?"

"Damn, seriously?"

"She's higher ranked than me too!?"

"She must've cheated or something."

"Y-Yeah, figures."

"But what if she really is that strong?"

The adventurers around us started kicking up a fuss. Fran, however, didn't really care

at all.

“Hey! You!”

Annnnd someone tried picking a fight with us. I knew this would happen, especially with all the commotion.

“You’re a liar!”

“Not lying.”

“There’s no way a kid like you could be an adventurer! That cards probably a fake!”

“You, also kid.”

“N-No I’m not! I’m already 15!”

This was honestly pretty much the usual save for the fact that the person trying to pick a fight with us was a kid. The teenage boy glared at Fran with his face dyed a shade of bright red.

“Genuine card.”

“I-I don’t believe you!”

“Genuine.”

“T-There’s no way that’s legit! Even I’m still just G ranked!”

He refused to believe that he was in the wrong, not that I can really blame him too much seeing as how Fran being a D ranker is kind of surreal in and of itself. What to do though? Like, there’s no way we could rough him up like we usually would, seeing as how he’s just a kid and all that.

(Master, use violence?)

[Hold on.]

(Nn? Why?)

Though I thought him to be nothing but a brat, there was no way for me really judge if Fran felt the same. I honestly couldn't tell if she thought of him a young or old seeing as how she was the younger of the two. That said, she obviously did see him as someone that annoyed her and tried to pick a fight with her either way.

[He's just a brat, so let's just let him off.]

(Then what do?)

[HMMMM...]

Oh, right. We could totally just use wind magic to make him shut up for the time being. We'll still deal with him normally if he actually tries something though.

Despite the fact that we'd went ahead and planned out what to do, we never actually ended up getting a chance to put our ideas into action.

"What's going on here?"

Oh, it's Miss Erza.

"Geez, are you guys causing trouble again? You boys sure are naughty."

"———!"

[———!]

Both Fran and I completely froze the moment we caught sight of the person that came out from the guild's rear. Fran, who'd always been taciturn and calm, had her eyes wide open in surprise. I feel like this might've been the first time I'd ever seen her in such a state. That said, I understood her sentiments. The person we caught sight of was one whose presence truly gave off a sense of impact.

"M-Miss Erza."

"Oh my, would you happen to be the source of all this fuss, Yuuri?"

"Er... no, I'm not. It's just that there happened to be a kid playing around inside the

guild, so I was just telling them off is all.”

The boy that’d been picking a fight with Fran, Yuuri, suddenly became all obedient. He immediately began standing at attention. Likewise, all the other adventurers had stopped slouching and straightened their backs as well.

“A kid? Oh my, how adorable she is.”

“...”

[Fran]

“...”

[Fran!]

“Was just bit surprised.”

[You alright?]

“Oh my, what is it?”

It seemed that this was Fran’s first time meeting anyone like the person standing before us. Again, I couldn’t blame her since I’d totally been taken aback as well.

“Nice to meet you, my name’s Erza.”

“Fran.”

“Fran, is it? Wonderful, I do hope we get along.”

“Nn. Just one question.”

“Whatever might that be?”

“Male? Or Female?”

The man that called himself Erza took a pose as if to show off his buff ass body while also lightly pressing a finger against one of his lips. He then winked and blew a kiss in

Fran's direction. Oh god why!?

"S e c r e t."

Secret my ass! He's totally a dude!

Though I wanted to call him out on his bullshit, I couldn't help but feel that it was a horrible idea to do so.

The way he was twisting his body around didn't actually seem all that gross. In fact, it didn't leave that bad of an impression on me at all, though I'd say that was probably mostly because of how ridiculous the rest of him appeared.

He wore heavy makeup on his cheeks, and thick eyeshadow on his eyes. His lips were covered in a red purple lipstick, and his head topped with a crimson afro. You could easily make out both his tights and muscular body even despite him wearing a layer of leather armour. Holy shit, he was a legit homo manwoman.

General Information

Name: Bardiche

Age: 47

Race: Human

Job: Indestructible Fighter

State: Normal

Status Level: 50/99

HP: 580

MP: 229

STR: 255

VIT: 310

AGI: 148

INT: 112

MGC: 110

DEX: 151

Skills

Transportation: Lv 3

Resistance to Environmental Conditions: Lv 5

Panic: Lv 4

Vigilance: Lv 5
Make up: Lv 6
Fist Techniques: Lv 5
Fist Arts: Lv 5
Combat Qigong: Lv 5
Regeneration: Lv 5
Sewing: Lv 3
Divine Staff Techniques: Lv 1
Divine Staff Arts: Lv 3
Resistance to Abnormal Status Conditions: Lv 6
Resistance to Mental Abnormalities: Lv 3
Staff Techniques: MAX
Staff Arts: MAX
Provoke: Lv 5
Beautification: Lv 5
Magic Resistance: Lv 4
Cooking: Lv 3
Vigour Manipulation
Muscles of Steel
Kobold Killer
Dulled Sense of Pain
Pain Conversion

Innate Skills

Enhanced Resistances

Titles

Ulmutt's Guardian
Kobold Killer
One Who has Overcome Pain

Equipment

Guardian's Mace
Scarlet Panther's Leather Armour
Rainbow Silk Garments
God of Beauty's Sandals
Charming Earrings

I felt an incredible urge to complain about a bunch of different stuff. Like, firstly, his goddamn name was Bardiche, not Erza. Secondly, how the hell did he look like he was 30!? That said though, both the aforementioned aspects paled before the one thing I *really* wanted to complain about, one of his skills.

Pain Conversion: Converts some pain to pleasure.

That skill right there was a masochist's best friend. Wait, does this mean that there's skills specialized for sadists as well? Like maybe something that boosts one's stats when bullying people or inflicting pain or something?

Either way, it seemed like the masochistic homosexual before us was one of the most powerful people I'd ever met after reincarnating.

Man, appraising him sure wore me the hell out... That's the first time that's happened...

"Are you the same little lady that happened to get into a fight just outside the city's gates?"

"Nn."

"Would you mind coming with me then? The guildmaster told me to bring you his way if I happened to find you."

"Guildmaster?"

"Yuppers. He seems to have some business with you. Would you mind?"

Did he want to scold us or something? I don't really think what we did was serious enough for us to need to have the guildmaster personally see to us.

Well, either way, it was one of the Guildmaster's personal requests, so it's not like we could actually turn it down at all.

"Okay."

"Thankies. I'll be taking her then everyone."

"Sure thing."

“Oh, and Yuuri, you should be a bit more vigilant, you know? You’ll die the moment you set foot in a dungeon if you’re bad at judging how strong people are.”

“Huh? What?”

“Over here Fran~”

“Nn.”

Fran followed Bardiche... Erza? Uhhh... I guess I’ll go with Erza, whatever.

Fran followed Erza as she led her in over to the Guildmaster.

“Hmmm hmm hm hm hmmm hmmm”

Oh god why! Stop shaking your ass while you walk around goddammit!

Chapter 143

The Guildmaster's Identity

Erza (♂) took us towards the Guildmaster's room by leading us up a flight of stairs. We had Urushi sit back in the shadows since we were visiting someone important and all that.

"I've brought Fran over as requested, Guildmaster."

"Thank you Erza, and hello again, Fran."

"Dias."

"I'm glad to see you still remember me."

We were surprised to see a familiar face, the man that'd given us a hand just outside the city's walls, awaiting us in the Guildmaster's office. He seemed to have been expecting us, as he was standing in his room with a wide smile on his face.

"Dias is Guildmaster?"

"I am. I guess I'll reintroduce myself. I am Dias, the Master of Ulmutt's Adventurer's Guild."

"Nn. Hope to get along."

Ah, so he was the Guildmaster. I see, I get it now. The guards were addressing him all respectfully and stuff because he was the person in charge of the adventurers in a city with a tonne of adventurers.

Oh right, I better appraise him before I forget again.

General Information

Name: Dias

Age: 71

Race: Human

Class: Phantom Magic Warrior

State: Normal

Status Level: 76/99

HP: 241

MP: 668

STR: 122

VIT: 110

AGI: 291

INT: 389

MGC: 278

DEX: 389

Skills

Sole Sense: Lv 4

Espionage: Lv 6

Bare Handed Combat Techniques: Lv 3

Bare Handed Combat Arts: Lv 4

Anti-Detection: Lv 6

Appraisal Detection: Lv 8

Inconspicuous: Lv 7

Magic: Lv 8

Vital Point Detection: Lv 4

Court Etiquette: Lv 6

Presence Detection: Lv 6

Presence Elimination: Lv 6

Illusion Magic: MAX

Phantom Magic: Lv 6

Resistance to Confusion: Lv 4

Weakness Detection: MAX

Covert Action: Lv 3

Resistance to Abnormal Status Conditions: Lv 3

Short Sword Techniques: Lv 7

Short Sword Arts: Lv 7

Earth Magic: Lv 3

Legerdemain: MAX
Throwing: Lv 7
Fire Magic: Lv 3
Charm Resist: Lv 4
Carpentry: Lv 4
Trap Removal: Lv 4
Trap Detection: Lv 8
Trap Creation: Lv 7
Vigour Manipulation
Dulled Sense of Pain
Indomitable
Thought Division
Magic Manipulation
Lesser Magic Boost

Unique Skills

Technically Senile: Lv 7

Innate Skills

Induced Thought: Lv 8
Induced Line of Sight: Lv 8

Titles

Master of The Art of Illusion
Guildmaster
Trickster
One who has Surpassed the Bounds of Mediocrity
A Ranked Adventurer

Equipment

Dragon Fang Short Sword
Dragon Scale Suit
Dragon Leather Mantle
Shoes of Quickened Feet
Bracelet of Substitution
Magician's Ring

Hmmm, he sure seemed strong. Both his stats and skills looked flat out ridiculous, and he appeared as if he was capable of combat at pretty much any range. He had a lot of skills that'd led him take advantage of his enemies' weak points too. Magic show related skills aside, he more or less looked to be an assassin.

He even had a unique skill to top it all off.

Technically Senile: Forces the target to forget that they have a certain skill for a fixed time period. This time period and Technically Senile's cooldown are both dependant on the target skill's level and rarity. Maximum period of senility: 1 minute.

Holy crap that's OP. Forgetting you have a skill in the middle of combat could be flat out fatal.

Induced Thought: Allows the caster to momentarily redirect the target's train of thought.

Induced Line of Sight: Allows the caster to momentarily redirect the target's line of sight.

His two innate skills, combined with Inconspicuous, Espionage, and other similar abilities, would probably allow him to make his opponents completely lose track of him, especially if he was to make use of his illusion based magics. The name of his job seemed to hint at the fact that he specialized in using the illusory arts in conjunction with magic trick-like abilities, meaning that he was actually much more difficult to deal with than his stats seemed to indicate.

"Hahaha. It seems that you just appraised me."

Wait, how?

"The Appraisal Detection skill allows me to sense those capable of using appraisal. It also lets me know if it gets used on me. Out of curiosity, can you see my unique skill?"

"Nn."

"I knew it. Your appraisal sure is high leveled. I'd actually used it when we met a bit earlier so you'd forget to appraise me, just so I wouldn't get found out cause I wanted to give you a bit of a surprise here and now. Sadly, you don't look even the slightest bit surprised though. Looks like my little prank ended up failing."

Oh, right, that explains why I kept forgetting to appraise him back then. Man, I knew something was off back then. In fact, I was so confident that I was getting paranoid that I was being attacked by a Stand.

...

Okay, yeah no, that was just flat out bullshit. I'd honestly blamed it on my own carelessness.

"Your appraisal skill sure is high leveled though. You put my skill on a three day cooldown, and I didn't even manage to successfully prank you. Man, I wish I never bothered."

"Your own fault."

"Yeah, I know. I'll make your stay here a lot more convenient as an apology, so could you please stop glaring at me already?"

So that whole gentlemanly act he pulled off outside town was all just a ruse for the sake of a prank? The boyish way he put his hands together and lowered his head made it look like my guess was perfectly on the mark. Fran seemed a bit peeved as well, but it's not like he actually caused us any harm. In fact, he'd even given us a hand, so I guess we don't really have any choice but to forgive him.

"...Will get mad next time."

Is it really normal for him to just go around using that skill on people? I feel like he'd be put in a pretty bad place if the person he tried to mess with ended up finding out. They might take his use of the skill as a sign of hostility and choose to engage him in battle.

"Seriously Guildmaster? You did it *again*? Do you really like playing pranks on all the promising newbies that much?"

Looks like this isn't just a one off thing. Is it really alright for the Guildmaster to do stuff like that?

"You can just hit him if he starts to get him on your nerves, Fran."

“Got it.”

“Nice, I’ll be cheering you on then! I hope that silly Guildmaster of ours ends up suffering just a bit some day.”

“Wow Erza, you’re terrible.”

“I mean, you’re the one always pushing it just because they’ll never fire you, so you kinda deserve it.”

“Why never fire?”

I was a bit curious about that as well. I mean, Guildmasters had authority and all that, but their positions weren’t nearly influential enough to allow them to permanently hold their titles.

“Well, you see, he’s really strong. He’s definitely one of Kranzel’s top five. I’m one of the strongest B ranked adventurers out there, but I’m not even the slightest bit close to even being his match, mokay? That make sense honey?”

Wow, is he really that strong? I mean, their stats don’t look *that* different, so I guess it’s based on how well they apply their skills. Erza seems like the brute force type, so he’d probably get screwed from having holes poked in his weak points.

“He’s strong enough to be worthy of his title as Guildmaster of a city containing two different dungeons. Mhmm.”

Well, yeah, he does seem several times stronger than most other adventurers.

“And he’s the only one capable of negotiating with the Dungeon Master too. Yuppers.”

Negotiating with the Dungeon Master? The hell’s that supposed to mean?

“Negotiate?”

“Oh, right, you just got here. Ulmutt’s gotten really famous because it’s got two dungeons, both of which are still alive. They’ve even got their Dungeon Masters still inside of them.”

“Dangerous.”

“Normally, yeah, but Ulmutt’s fine, so no worries there honey.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s because we made a deal with the Dungeon Masters. The Dungeon Masters have agreed not to strengthen the dungeon any more than absolutely necessary or tell their monsters to invade the city. They’ve also agreed to tolerate adventurers and their actions within the dungeon’s confines. In exchange, we provide the Dungeon Masters supplies from outside their dungeons and agree not to touch them or the dungeons’ cores. Yuppers.”

Ah, I see. I guess this is something that becomes possible under the condition that the Dungeon Master is of an intelligent race. It’d make sense for said Dungeon Master to prefer coexistence to getting destroyed by high ranking adventurers.

“The Guildmaster was the first person to succeed in negotiating with the Dungeon Master. Mhmm. He did it back in his younger days.”

“Man, it was really hard, and took forever.”

“I don’t really know why the Dungeon Masters trust this old man, but, they’ve appointed him as a point of interaction, so we kinnnda don’t have the slightest clue what’d happen to the guild if he quit. Ulmutt only exists for its dungeons, so there’s really no way for anyone to fire the Guildmaster without bringing about a tonne of harm.”

“Heh, and you know what that means? I get to do whatever I want, and no one can stop me.”

“That’s not something that’s supposed to make you act with such a irresponsible attitude!”

Holy crap. I think I need glasses. I swear I just saw a homo manwoman scolding an old man in the same manner as she would a brat.

“Mmm, I think it’s about time for me to excuse myself.”

“Keep up the good work.”

“You really shouldn’t be saying that seeing as how you’re the one that keeps making me work harder than I should be!”

You know, I could actually kinda get use to this. Their interactions, I mean.

“See you later Fran. I really think I’ve taken a liking to you, so tell me if you ever need anything. I’ll help you out if I can. Mhmm, yes I will.”

“Nn.”

“Byebye~ Muah~”

Oh god why, he just threw a kiss in at the end just to do it! Holy crap, that was dangerous. I almost instinctively moved my body out of its path and got myself caught in action by Dias.

(Master, something wrong? Twitchy.)

[I-It’s nothing, don’t worry about it.]

Though, it seems like Fran actually did notice.

Chapter 144

Dias' Abilities

The Guildmaster breathed a light sigh not too long after Erza's departure.

"Whew. He's not a bad guy, but I find myself having a bit of a hard time dealing with him."

I'm guessing he means that he can't stand Erza on a physiological level or something like that. Fran seems fine, but that's more so because she hasn't really developed a sense of personal space yet.

"He's what I would call a little bit special, you see."

"Man, but also woman?"

"That's a part of it."

A part? There's more to it?

"Other parts too?"

"It looks like you'll be stuck dealing with him for quite the time to come, so I guess there shouldn't be any problems with me telling you. Besides, I'd end up with a few concerns over my own safety if you were to fall into his venomous clutches."

Dias muttered several things under his breath with a serious look on his face; he seemed to be lost in thought.

"Erza's what you'd call a man with a woman's heart. He's equally interested in both men and women alike, and his tastes span the generations as far as age goes. In fact, both you and I fall into his strike zone. He's even got an inclination that makes him happy when abused by others."

[...]

(Master?)

[Holy shit! I think I actually just blanked out for a second.]

So he's a masochistic bisexual manwoman attracted to basically everything and anything? Like, isn't he, as a living thing, supposed to have instincts that make him only want to tap to certain things? Whatever the hell happened to those? Holy crap, I think this has gone so far that I'm starting to feel physical harm. Each of these facts is as bad as a blow to the gut. I'mma say we should stay as far away from him as possible, for sanity's sake.

“???”

All of what we'd discussed seemed to have gone right over Fran's head. I can practically see a bunch of question marks floating on top of her.

(Master? Understand?)

[I-I do, but I think it's fine for you not to get it for now.]

(Why?)

[I-It's a subject for grown ups. You don't need to get it yet. In fact, I think you'd be happier not getting it than getting it.]

(Hm?)

I'd honestly rather prefer that she never gets it, if anything.

[A-All you really have to know is that Erza's a bit of a weirdo. That's it.]

(Nn. Got it.)

Whew. Thank god that's over. I was pretty confident that I'd end up losing my ability to think rationally if I had to actually explain Erza's *inclinations*.

“Erza doesn't believe in simply watching over children lovingly and will act on his urges, but that isn't to say that he actively goes after them himself either. Despite all

else, he still is technically Ulmutt's ace, so some children do end up developing odd tastes and approaching him on their own."

Oh, so that's what he meant by falling into Erza's venomous clutches? Yeah no, that's more like getting flat out poisoned and corrupted.

"To tell you the truth, I was actually warned by a certain individual ahead of time that I shouldn't let you fall into Erza's clutches... I'm pretty sure I'd end up getting murdered by said individual if I did."

"Certain individual?"

"Amanda of Hairiti. One of your acquaintances, I presume?"

"Nn."

"She'd sent me a letter by hawk. Here, feel free to take a look if you'd like to see it."

Dias smiled bitterly as he showed us the letter. It named Fran and described her features before going on and on about how cute and good a kid she was. It ended off by saying that she'd probably stand out, and that Dias should be aware of the fact that other adventurers would likely try to pick on her. It more or less coerced Dias to figure something out and do something about the fact that Erza would definitely end up taking a liking to Fran.

"Erza and Amanda are on pretty good terms, but Amanda refuses to budge when it comes to anything related to children."

"Nn."

"I mean, again, he's really not that bad a guy though..."

I really ought to thank Amanda. We owe her so much for having the Guildmaster help us with this whole Erza thing. I mean, we're grateful she helped us get in touch with the Guildmaster period, but the Erza thing was what truly made me feel like thanking her from the bottom of my heart. Like, I know Erza's not that bad a guy or anything like that, but chances were, I would've flat out snapped if Erza ended up taking a liking to us and following us around everywhere all round the clock.

“Alrighty... Would you mind if we changed topics and started addressing something a bit more serious?”

Dias’ face suddenly went solemn as he brought both hands together in front of him much in the same manner as Commander Ik*ri.

“That sword isn’t just your average everyday sword, is it?”

The next words that came out of his mouth had all the effectiveness of an explosive.

[What!?!]

“!!”

“Heh, curious as to why I found out? How about appraise me again if you want to know?”

“?”

“Come on, just give it a shot. I tricked you the first time, you know?”

Hmmm... I guess I’ll do as he says. I’m curious as to how he managed to figure me out, so yeah.

I ended up trying to appraise him again after a moment’s worth of contemplation.

(Master?)

[Hmmm...? He’s got more skills...?]

There weren’t any differences in his stats or skill levels. However, he had two more skills than he had last time: Appraisal Cover Up and Mind Reading. Both new skills were level 8.

“You see them?”

“Nn.”

“Appraisal Cover Up can either be used to disguise one’s entire stat page, but that’s not

it. You can also focus the skill's effects on a few specific items in order to completely and totally hide them. I've been doing the latter to hide Mind Reading, my trump card."

Holy shit. Dias' skillset lets him go after weak points, so giving him a skill like that just flat out makes him completely borked.

"Mind Reading can be used to outwit people, especially when paired with Technically Senile. I'd love to have Appraisal as well, but it seems I don't really have any affinity for the skill. I just can't get it no matter how hard I try. Oh well, it's pretty easy to figure out what weapon and magic based skills someone's got just by looking at them, and most people tend to think about their skills right before they use them, so I can just deal with whatever comes at me by reading my opponent's mind ahead of time."

As I analyzed the skill, I came to realize a pressing issue.

Mind Reading: Allows one to catch a glimpse of a target's thoughts.

His skill didn't specify that it could only read the minds of people or intelligent animals. Does that mean he can read my thoughts as well? Even though I'm a sword? Wait, wait, can he read the mind of anything capable of actual thought period?

"Heheheh, looks like you're panicking. Have you figured it out? It's exactly as you think. This skill allowed me to come to realize that your sword can think too, Fran."

[Shit, he just totally read Fran's mind again.]

"Oh, just so you know, I don't actually go around randomly reading people's minds, you know? I just happened to catch sight of the fight you were involved in earlier. I figured I'd read your mind and step in if you happened to want to kill the people that'd bothered you, which would've been a fairly easy task seeing as how bloodlust is a simple thing to read. It just so happened that I overheard you seemingly having a telepathic conversation, at which point in time I realized that your sword had the ability to think too."

So he knew about me right from the moment he first called out to us? Is this why he called Fran here to begin with?

"So why don't you tell me about that sword of yours?"

(What do?)

[Hmm... It looks like he's figured most of it out anyway. He'd probably actually get mad if we kept trying to hide anything else, so...]

That said, it wasn't like he had any real evidence. Playing dumb is probably still an option. We don't really know what his goal is here, and if worse comes to worst, he might even end up trying to confiscate me and wield me for himself.

"Hahaha, it looks like you really don't trust me at all. Don't worry, I won't do anything that'll make you worse off. I'll even swear it in Amanda's name. I owe her a great deal, so I wouldn't be able to face her if I wronged you in any which way. Plus, I already told you about my own trump card, so it's only fair for you to tell me about yours. Right? Come on."

Dias' smile contained not even the slightest trace of malice, and it didn't seem like he was lying either...

Hah... Well, I guess it can't be helped. We'll be staying here for a while, so I don't want to make an enemy out of the Guildmaster. He'd probably end up figuring out whatever we were thinking anyways, even if we did try to pull one over him.

[Do you mind?]

(Nn. Can't be helped.)

He pretty much knows anyways.

[I guess it can't be helped then.]

"Woah, w-was that the sword just now...?"

[Yeah, hi. Fran's sword speaking.]

"Hahaha! Wow! You can actually speak, just like a human!? I was not expecting that."

"Nn. Master amazing."

"Master?"

And so, we did the usual and had Fran explain my name and effectively force the other person to praise it. Luckily, Dias was pretty good at reading the mood, so he complimented Fran's naming sense a whole bunch, almost too much, in fact.

[So did you need something from me? Or were you just curious?]

"Right, my bad. This is my first time seeing an intelligent weapon, so I ended up getting carried away out of excitement. I admit I was a bit curious, but I also wanted to give the two of you a bit of advice."

"Advice?"

"Yes, advice. Master, Appraisal isn't too uncommon a skill, but, it seems you've kind of just been using it all willy nilly?"

[Yeah, pretty much.]

"I know that I'm not really qualified to say this myself seeing as how I read people's minds, but you should be more careful on who you use it on since it'll expose everything they wish to keep a secret. There's a fair number of people out there who really hate nobles and royals, so you may end up getting arrested under the pretense of being a spy should you be caught using appraisal on either of those two types of people. Many royals even have appraisal detection, so you'll be noticed immediately. And do keep in mind that the crime will end up falling on Fran's shoulders in your case."

You know, he's got a pretty good point now that I think about it. Appraisal lets you pretty much see everything, so people with lots of secrets would probably hate for it to be used on them. I'd never actually thought about the skill from that kind of perspective before.

"I'm sure that Fran will ultimately end up meeting royals on multiple occasions in the future due to how promising an adventurer she seems, so do take heed of this for when that happens. If not, then..."

Dias gave his neck a light chop instead of finishing his sentence with words.

Yeah, makes sense. Pissing off royalty isn't exactly something you could get away with,

at least not easily. Putting it like that, randomly using Appraisal can lead to terrifying results. I guess I'll be a bit more prudent.

"That's all for Appraisal related advice. I still want to advise you on something else too though."

"Something else?"

"You guys haven't really leveled your detection type skills, have you?"

[What makes you think that?]

"It's because you didn't realize when I used Technically Senile, Mind Reading, Induced Thought, or Induced Line of Sight. I mean, I am good at hiding the fact that I'm using them, but you guys are just way too defenseless, you know? Strength in combat aside, you guys are really unguarded for people that've got something to hide, you're just flat out unbalanced. You should've been able to realize that something was amiss had you trained your ability to detect as much as you had your ability to fight."

We do have a whole slew of detection type skills, but most of them are rather low leveled. The highest would be Presence Detection, and even that's just level 5.

[So is having level 5 Presence Detection just not enough?]

"It isn't. You'll either want at least one level 8 skill or three level 6 skills if you want to go up against any tougher opponents."

Both those options are pretty far off.

"It isn't an absolute necessity in general. You could always act in much the same manner as Erza, who claims to have nothing to hide, but that wouldn't quite do for the two of you now, would it?"

[Yeah, I'd like as few people to know about me as possible.]

"I happen to have a pretty good place for you guys to train. Want to check it out?"

[You mean the dungeon?]

“Exactly. You know that Ulmutt’s got two dungeons, right?”

“Nn.”

“The western dungeon is for beginners. It contains very few traps, and most of the magic beasts inside of it will fight you head on. It’s a good place for newbies to grind up their levels. The eastern one is effectively the western’s opposite. It’s for more experienced adventurers, and contains lots of traps. The magic beasts within it also like to set up ambushes, with the inclination only growing stronger as you dive deeper into the dungeon’s depths. Many D ranked adventurers have ended up losing their lives within the eastern dungeon’s confines.”

[So what you’re saying is that you want us to head to the eastern one to train up our detection skills?]

“You guessed it. The eastern dungeon is perfect for anyone that wants to get better at detection. So, how about it? You probably won’t be able to suddenly bump your skill levels up, but it should still be worth your time. You normally have to prove yourself in the western dungeon before being admitted to the eastern one, but I’ll offer you guys a chance to bypass all that if you want.”

[I guess that’s fine? I mean, we were planning to go dungeon diving anyways...]

I don’t really know if we’ll manage to actually start leveling our skills up, but, we should at least be able to train a bit in order to actually get better at using some of them. It’s usually pretty hard to get practice with detection based skills, so I’m totally fine with taking that as a bit of an added bonus. That said though, I can’t help but feel a bit bothered by all this.

[But why go so far?]

I just can’t seem to bring myself to trust him. I doubt he’d do this much for us sheerly out of good will.

“Hahaha, I’m not trying to trick you, you know? It’s just that this happens to be something that benefits the guild.”

“Nn? Me exploring east dungeon benefits guild?”

“Yes it does. The western dungeon is filled with newbies, none of which will actually be able to tell how strong you are. I can say for sure that you’ll end up getting in even more trouble if you end up going west.”

Ah, I see. The tournament is coming up soon, so Ulmutt’s getting a huge influx of adventurers. With more people, you tend to get more idiots, meaning more people that’d try to pick a fight with Fran. The guild would probably be pretty happy if it manages to minimize the amount of commotion caused by her.

“There are very few adventurers exploring the eastern dungeon to begin with, but those that are are also relatively experienced. They likely won’t mess with you so long as the guild makes an announcement or two.”

[Hence, you’d prefer us dive into the eastern dungeon as opposed to the western one?]

“Exactly, it’s a deal that benefits us both. So, how about it?”

[What do you think, Fran?]

“I don’t mind.”

“Good, good. It looks like you’re nice and motivated.”

The Guildmaster seemed to have expected our answer, as he immediately pulled an eastern dungeon permit with Fran’s name carefully inscribed on it. Holy crap, he was totally ready for us.

Real talk, I really can’t hate Dias, but I can’t bring myself to trust him either.

Chapter 145

The Reference Letter

Fran examined the permit she got from Dias by flipping it over and shining a light on it.

“Is something wrong?”

“Nn. Might have hidden mechanism.”

“Hahaha, wow, you’re mean. I’m right here, you know?”

“...”

Dias had made his claim with a smile on his face, but that hadn’t been nearly enough for him to earn Fran’s trust, she continued to gaze at the letter suspiciously regardless.

“Just trust me on this okay? I won’t play any more pranks on you. The only pranks I ever play are ones that end up benefiting the adventurers that get pranked, you know?”

“Meaning?”

“Think of my pranks as a form of parental love. I use them to make sure everyone doesn’t get too relaxed on a day to day basis. I don’t just play them to have fun.”

“...”

Fran stared down Dias, whose expression remained serious despite his obvious bullshitting. I didn’t even need the Principle of Falsehood to know he was straight up lying to our faces.

“Well... Okay, I guess it is half for my own entertainment.”

“Nn.”

“A-Ah, right, that reminds me. Just letting you into the eastern dungeon isn’t all I’ve come up with. I’ve also got a few other ideas that’ll benefit you.”

The Guildmaster ended up just flat out changing the topic, not that I really mind given that I was interested in what he’d brought up.

[Other ideas, you say?]

“Yeah. To be more exact, I’ve thought up three different courses of action. The first is to issue a proclamation regarding the protection of younger adventurers, something we, as the guild, ourselves would also benefit from. I’m fairly certain that this is something you’ve already noticed, but Ulmutt’s got a relatively large proportion of younger adventurers.”

“Nn.”

“Our dungeons ^[1] fall in somewhere in the lower D ranked area, but we’ve a system that allows F and G ranked adventurers to explore the upper floors regardless so long as they party up with people ranked in at E or higher. This system really helps newbies that want to gain experience, as well as G rankers, as they aren’t allowed to enter any of the country’s other dungeons.”

“That’s why, G ranked kids, lots?”

“Exactly. The problem lies with the fact that many of the people out there like to take advantage of them. They manipulate them and use them as bait. I’ve been thinking of enforcing a penalty for actions like that for quite some time now.”

So Fran just happened to end up as the spark that’d set his plan into action? Makes sense.

“Second?”

“My second idea would be to go around telling everyone how much Erza likes you. Ulmutt’s adventurers typically prefer to be on his good side rather than not.”

Right. All the adventurers seemed to quiet down the moment he showed up. Yup, makes sense. There’s no way anyone would be willing to go head to head with *that*

after all.

“Last?”

“That would be to quickly raise your rank.”

“??”

“You know, Fran, the guild really values all the contributions you’ve made to it. We’ll bump you up to C rank the moment you complete enough requests to qualify yourself for it.”

“Surprised.”

Yeah, me too. Was it because they took what we did back in Barbra into consideration?

“The royalty you escorted named you an incredibly valuable asset. The reports they sent contained nothing but praise.”

Oh, he must be talking about when we escorted Prince Flut and Princess Satia.

Fran’s expression remained unchanged, but I felt Dias’ words ignite a fiery passion within her.

“Will do best.”

“Please do. We’ll do for you as we have for every other adventurer that’s reached C rank here at the Ulmutt branch and make a series announcements in order to spread your name far and wide. That way, almost everyone in the city will know you’re a C rank, and consequently, there’ll be far fewer people that’ll want to try picking a fight with you.”

Fewer? So there still will be some? Can’t be helped, I guess. Oh well, that works too. Less is always more when it comes to this kinda thing.

“I’ll give you a few requests you can complete during your time in the eastern dungeon. You should be able to finish them and easily rank yourself up while going through with your training. “

Dias handed us twenty something requests as he continued to speak.

“You’ll need to complete another 23 D ranked requests if you want to qualify for C rank. Take all these, and start doing what you can.”

“Got it.”

[Thanks.]

And so, we ended up being allowed into the dungeon. I’d been expecting us to have to be examined or something, but I guess this is fine too. It’s a shame that Klimut’s reference letter ended up going to waste, but oh well.

Actually, I guess there’s no harm in giving it to him anyways, right?

“Here.”

“That looks like... Alessa’s Guild’s crest. Would that be a letter from Klimut?”

“Nn. Reference letter.”

Dias’ face paled in unease the moment Fran nodded to affirm his suspicions. Wait, what? You okay, old dude?

“By the way, Fran.”

“Nn?”

“Umm... You’re not going to tell Klimut about how I tried to play a bit of a prank on you, right?”

For some odd reason, his tone voice of voice had immediately turned into a flattering one.

“Why?”

“I guess it’d be better for me to say since I’m the one asking for a favour here. Klimut is one of my seniors and someone I look up to as an adventurer. He gave me a hand when I was just starting out, so I owe him quite a bit. I wouldn’t be able to bring myself

to face him if you told him what I did. Er, actually, that's not it at all. To be honest, I'm just flat out terrified of him."

I'd used the Principle of Falsehood to verify his words, and apparently, he wasn't lying. He was actually afraid of Klimut.

Well, I'm glad that reference letter of ours ended up actually seeing some use. In fact, it more or less ended up functioning as a sort of trump card, huh?

"Will tell Amanda and Klimut next time something weird done."

"I'm sorry. I'll never do anything weird to you ever again."

You know, it's really pretty rare to see a Guildmaster prostrate himself on all fours. Man, I wish I had a camera right now. Oh well, either way, it looked like Dias is going to stop with his pranks now, so all's good. [2]

"Nn. Got it."

"Hahaha..."

Seeing Fran take a haughty stance while holding Klimut's letter with Dias prostrating before her almost made me want to say "Case Closed!"

Chapter 146

The Whereabouts of Those Sought

I made sure to double check a few details regarding our detection skills before we left Dias' office.

Specifically, I asked him to once again verify that we'd only need either a single level 8 skill or 3 level 6 skills.

"Personally, I can figure out when someone's using Appraisal right away because I've got the Appraisal Detection skill, but it's normally quite difficult to catch someone in the act of it. The skill is honestly quite a stealthy one. The same goes for connoisseur and mind reading type skills. They're all pretty hard to detect."

That sounds like something that'd make people with secrets to hide go crazy with anxiety. Someone could find out whatever it is you're trying to hide without you ever being the wiser.

"Skills like Induced Thought and Technical Senility are much more difficult to cover up. Even I can't make them totally undetectable despite having both the skills at a fairly high level."

Neither the Appraisal or Connoisseur-type skills involved invoking any sort of effect that'd influence their targets. All you had to do to activate either was look at whatever it is you wanted to know more about, and that was it.

Induced Thought, on the other hand, flat out messed with its target. Hence, it became much less difficult to detect.

Taking that theory and applying it to the skills in my possession allowed me to realize that it'd probably be hard for people to sense Appraisal or the Principle of Falsehood. Skill Taker, on the other hand, seemed like it'd be pretty easy to notice immediately.

"I doubt Presence Detection would allow you to detect if you're being appraised, even if raised to its maximum level, but leveling the skill to level 8 should at least be enough

for it to let you to detect if someone uses a skill that'll have an effect on you."

In other words, level 8 probably wouldn't cut it for us. Self Evolution allowed us to get skills much more quickly than the average person, but it also came back to bite us in the ass by not providing us with any of the experience typically involved in leveling it. Luckily, it looked like the eastern dungeon would allow us an opportunity to overcome our shortcomings. In either case, it seemed like our goal was set. We'd dive into the dungeon and level Presence Detection up to 8 either through absorbing magic stones or using self evolution points.

"Leaving now."

"Kay, see you around. Oh, and please don't forget about the Klimut thing!"

Fran turned her back on Dias as he begged her for a favour and departed from his office.

[Let's go check out the library and see if we can gather ourselves some information about the dungeon.]

"Nn."

[We don't have that much time to spare, so we'd best get all this administrative stuff over with as quickly as possible.]

We needed to find ourselves a place to stay before nightfall. That, however, was honestly not my first priority. I had something else on my mind, something much more important than just finding an inn.

[You think Old Man Gallus is here yet?]



And so, two hours passed. We had long stopped looking around the library and instead started walking around the city in search of Gallus. He should've arrived way before we did, especially after taking into consideration the fact that we'd gotten ourselves a little bit more than a little bit sidetracked.

The reason we were searching for him, and not verification of the fact that he was here

was because it was pretty obvious that he'd at least been here rather recently. Many of Ulmutt's adventurers were like the ones in Alessa in the sense that they were walking around with high quality weapons made from iron or steel.

We had started out by asking a few of these adventurers for confirmation, and it turned out that our guesses had hit the nail right on the head. Their weapons were indeed made by the old man, but that was where our smooth sailing came to an end, as they'd all pointed us in different directions when we asked them for his location. It seemed like Gallus had been going around the city borrowing other blacksmith's forges in order to make his goods as opposed to staying in one place like he did back in Alessa.

Fran and I ended up having no choice but to visit random weapon stores in order to hopefully run into him whilst also listening in on the adventurers in our vicinity along the way. Much to our annoyance, it seemed that most were talking about topics relating to dungeons or the upcoming martial arts tournament. We didn't hear anything about Gallus at all. That said, we did happen to stumble across a group of three adventurers discussing something that just so happened to catch our attention.

"Hey, you hear about the evil god's fortress? Apparently it fell overnight. Wasn't the Millenia Fortress supposed to be their most fortified stronghold?"

"Yeah, but that's not the only place in which the evil god's believers have gathered en masse. The rumours have been saying that some of them are even getting blessed with the evil god's powers."

"Wait, wait, that's a thing? I thought the only people that worshiped the evil god were criminals and outlaws."

"Apparently, Evil Goblins and Evil Kobolds are only the way they are because they've powered up after receiving the Evil God's blessings, not that I've ever seen either of them myself."

"Oh! Those things? I've heard that they're really hard to deal with. Wait, don't some countries go all out in order to exterminate the evil god's believers? Maybe that's why Millenia fell."

"Oh come on, you know that the Millenia Fortress is in the Kingdom of Reidos, right? There's no way the Reidosians would ever bother wiping them out. In fact, it's far more

likely for them to try putting them to use instead.”

“But, if the Reidosians didn’t crush the fortress, who did?”

“Who knows? I’ve caught wind a few rumours saying that it was because they had a falling out. I heard it from one of my acquaintances that happened to be in the area when it happened, and he got his info from one of the underlings that escaped from within the fortress. Apparently one of their top brass happened to get back that day and caused an uproar. It’s said that guy had totally transformed, as if born anew. His body became like that of a magic beast’s instead of a human’s. He used that new body of his to slay all the other executives before laughing and claiming that he’d consumed them for their power. He was like a demon, they say.”

“Dude, that sounds freaky as hell.”

“Were you try to tell us a horror story or something?”

“Come on guys, I was being serious. Though, it was just a rumour I heard, so do admit that it might’ve ended up getting exaggerated.”

I was rather surprised to hear that the Evil God’s believers had a sort of fortress set up, and even more surprised to hear that it’d already fallen at the hands of one of their own allies.

(Just now, talking about Zerrosreed?)

[You think so too?]

To me, that sounded like Zerrosreed feeding his cannibalism skill no matter how you spun it. Does that mean he’ll end up going around tearing down all the Evil God’s strongholds for his skill’s sake if we just leave him be? I mean, that actually kinda sounds like a plan. We could leave him be till he takes out all the Evil God’s followers and then just kill him off. Only problem is that we don’t really know how strong he’ll end up getting by the time we get to him.

(Growl.)

[You sure sound pumped, Urushi.]

(Will defeat some day.)

[Yeah, we'll kick his ass. But first, we'll have to get stronger.]

(Nn.)

(Woof!)

The conversation we overheard was interesting, but it didn't really give us anything to act on, so we continued walking around town with our ears perked.

We weren't able to find anyone that knew Gallus till we entered our third smithy. Its owner was much like the old man, he was also a dwarven blacksmith.

"Already left Ulmutt?"

"He left a few days ago cause he heard about what happened in Barbra. I'm pretty sure he decided to head over because he figured he'd be able to help."

Looks like we just missed each other.

"He said he'd be back before the Martial Arts Tournament, so you might catch him if you sit around long enough."

"Got it."

"Y'know, Gallus has actually told me about you ahead of time. So that's what his custom made named equipment looks like...? Damn, that's fabulous."

The blacksmith looked at Fran's black cat armour pieces with his eyes gleaming. I mean, I got that he was looking at the armour, but many of the people that passed by seemed to think him a pervert ogling a little girl.

In fact, most passerbys regarded him like he was some sort of weirdo, and some had even given him a series of harsh glares. I couldn't help but think that they were going to end up reporting him to the authorities, though I hoped they'd refrain.

The dwarven smith, however, completely ignored them all and even continued to do things like touching the mantle and checking the quality and feel of its fabric. Fran

herself was rather happy that her equips were being praised, so she stood still and cooperated as he went through with the inspection process.

It took the blacksmith five whole minutes worth of staring and touching before he finally found himself smiling in satisfaction.

“What a sight for sore eyes. Thanks for letting me do that. Feel free to come here if you want your stuff repaired for cheap. I’ll help you get your hands on discounted dungeon supplies too.”

We hadn’t really been concerned about the repairing our stuff, but, the supplies part sounded pretty nice. We might end up needing stuff in order to go dungeon diving and whatnot.

[Oh, right. Let’s ask him if he knows any good inns.]

“Nn. Know good inns?”

“You haven’t decided yet? As for me, I think the Cellar Blade Shop’s probably one of my favourite places. The booze they serve there is great.”

Well, that’s a dwarf for you. That sounds good and all, but wouldn’t somewhere with a lot of drunks be all noisy?

“The bar’s in the basement, so it’s not too bad as far as noise goes.”

“Got it. Will go check out.”

“Alright, and do come again.”

“Nn.”



The inn the smith introduced us to was one with thick walls and a rather calm air to it.

We decided to check out the place they had underground, and it turned out to not be nearly as loud as I’d been expecting. It was much more of a bar than a tavern. There

was a cafeteria-like area as well, but it wasn't all that loud there either. The only booze they served was located at the bar, so you couldn't eat and drink at the same time. As a result, there were far fewer people making noise. It looked like the dwarven blacksmith had been right. The noise didn't look like it was going to end up bothering us.

Our room was of a similar standard of quality. The floor was clean, and the bed soft. We were even allowed to let Urushi in in his smaller form, albeit at a bit of an additional cost.

All in all, it seemed like a really nice place.

"Nn. Not bad."

"Woof."

Better yet, it looked like both Fran and Urushi liked it too.

[Okay, that's done. Any other plans?]

"Dungeon diving."

"Woof woof!"

They were both just full of energy, which, I guess wasn't really too bad a thing. We have a bunch of requests and whatnot to handle anyway.

[Alright, but let's check out all the requests we have first.]

"Right. Forgot."

We began placing the requests on the bed so we could go through them more easily.

Wait, there's a tonne here. Is it really okay for us to take all these? I feel like other adventurers would start calling nepotism if they found out how many we were hogging them all to ourselves.

[It looks like it'd probably be better for us not to tell anyone else how many requests we're handling.]

“Nn.”

Er, well, I said that, but it turned out that half the requests were subjugation type requests. They were much like the regular goblin ones in the sense that they were perpetually active. That is, they could be completed by any one at any time.

The other half required us to gather materials.

“High Ogre horns, Man Eating Mole claws.”

[I don’t think I’ve ever even heard of any of these magic beasts.]

“Woof.”

[Though, the notes I took in the library say that they can be found starting at the eastern dungeon’s tenth floor.]

“Looking forward.”

All of the requests we got were clearly justified in their classifications as quests for D rankers, as they all needed us to do stuff in places newbies would have to struggle to even get to. It seemed that you weren’t supposed to go past the eastern dungeon’s 9th floor if you were F ranked or lower.

[Let’s see... Phantom Dogs, Darkstalkers. Yeah, it looks like there’s lots of stuff that’ll try sneak attacking us.]

Dias’ info had been spot on.

It actually took us quite some time to finish looking through all the requests we got. Fran and Urushi both ended up bored out of their minds. You know, Fran should start learning how to focus on this stuff. Gathering information seems like it’d be a pretty important basic skill for adventurers.

Though, she did manage to spend a whole hour looking through it all, so I guess that is technically a pretty big improvement. She used to start nodding off after just five minutes.

[Alright, let's go.]

“Wait. Not yet.”

Oh? Is she going to go through all the info again?

“Eat first.”

“Woof!”

[Oh. Right, yeah. Let's do that.]

Chapter 147

Arriving at the Dungeon

We headed over to the dungeon immediately after eating our fill at the inn's dining hall.

Neither Fran nor I knew where to go, so we asked one of the lady's at the inn. The reply we got from her was surprisingly short and simple.

"The west dungeon's over near the western stronghold, and the east one's right beside the eastern stronghold. Just walk in a straight line, you can't miss either of them."

It looked like the dungeons were inside the large cylindrical buildings. Rather, it turned out that the buildings had actually only been constructed in order to enclose the dungeons in the first place. ^[1]

At first, most people had still felt that the dungeon masters were rather untrustworthy. They didn't actually believe that they would uphold the contracts they made with Dias.

Thus, the Kingdom of Kranzel ended up constructing two large buildings, one around each dungeon. These two constructions were an attempt to minimize the people's feelings of anxiety. The people would be less concerned about the dungeon masters failing to fulfill their promises so long as they had insurance in the case that it happened. The wall that surrounded the city was also constructed with the same purpose in mind.

That is, the outer wall would be able to contain the dungeons' monsters even if they managed to break through the strongholds built up in their immediate vicinities. The construction of both these countermeasures managed to settle most of the citizens' concerns.

That, however, begged a certain question. What did Ulmutt's citizens think? It was technically possible for the city to end up as a battlefield.

We'd asked for the innkeeper lady's opinion, and it turned that most of the people that lived here actually felt more positively about the dungeons than anything. The majority of Ulmutt's citizens either were merchants and adventurers, or had some sort of connection with them. They'd actually only chosen to move to Ulmutt because of its dungeons. They knew the dangers and had long acknowledged them as a part of their daily lives. In fact, the city's people saw the dungeons as their breadwinners and were even concerned with their conservation.

They went as far as to regard the city's outer walls as a nice added bonus that they just happened to be lucky enough to get from the government, reason being that they hadn't paid even a cent for it themselves.

All I had to say was... wow. I mean, I should've expected it given that the city was frequented by rowdy adventurers and cunning merchants, but damn, the people here got guts.



We did as the innkeeper instructed and made our way towards the eastern stronghold. It didn't take long for us to realize that navigating the city's streets was as hard as navigating a maze, even with the end goal almost in sight. It'd almost felt whoever built the place had done so without a solid layout planned out ahead of time.

The closer we got to the fortress, the more apparent this became. The buildings themselves started getting older and more historic looking, whereas the streets just flat out degenerated into a huge mess of alleyways and intersections. The older buildings looked to be of a poor quality, as they obviously weren't built with any sort of construction related principles or standards in mind.

We went up and down stairs, hit dead ends, turned around and did all sorts of wandering before finally reaching the dungeon's entrance about an hour after we first set out for it.

"Arrived. Here, dungeon?"

"Woof?"

[I'm pretty sure that this is the fortress they built up around the dungeon. We should be able to get ourselves inside if we head over to that gate over there.]

The building looked pretty big up close. I also now realized that the stronghold we were looking at was no normal fortress. It didn't have windows, and its gate would actually be pretty small if you ignored the part that had been dug out under the ground level. I could see why though. I mean, they called it a fortress, but it was only actually built in order to keep the dungeon in check and whatnot. In other words, its goal was to keep what was inside in as opposed to a regular fortress' goal of keeping what was outside out.

A group of soldiers had taken up residence in the fortress' upper floors so they could act in times of emergency.

Ten odd adventurers were lined up in front of a small building set up by the fortress' gate. It looked like they were waiting their turns in order to get themselves admitted to the dungeon.

Fran garnered a bunch of attention as she got in line, but this time around, there wasn't anyone that bothered messing with her.

A fair portion of the adventurers gathered at the gate seemed to be ranked in at D or higher, and most were able to discern that she wasn't just some weakling. Having Urushi around helped quite a bit too. We'd already had him go back to his actual size, so he looked fairly intimidating.

Even the more mischievous looking adventurers seemed not all that keen on involving themselves with us with our giant ass wolf friend around. Urushi was normally restricted from using this form. He couldn't parade around town in it, and dungeons were often too narrow for him.

"Next plea — WHAT THE! That wolf is huge!"

"W-What's wrong? What's all this commotion all of a sudden!?"

The person responsible for admissions accidentally screamed when he saw Urushi. The guard hadn't ended up seeing him ahead of time because he happened to be in the building's blind spot.

"W-Whoops, s-sorry. I just got a bit surprised is all."

“Sorry little lady, he’s a bit of an idiot.”

The guards that showed up here were much more pleasant sounding than the ones that we’d met outside the city. They apologized sincerely and whatnot, and more importantly, they didn’t really seem even to bear even the slightest bit of disdain. Their attitudes were so good that they even left Fran in a state of confusion.

“...?”

“Is something the matter?”

“Nn. Complete opposite of guards outside city.”

“I see. Did you run into any sort of complication with them, perhaps?”

“That’d probably be because they sent all the more diligent guys over to Barbra.”

Ulmutt’s soldiers needed to be strong enough to both guard the dungeons and keep unruly adventurers in check. Thus, stronger individuals were often hired even if their attitudes happened to be a bit lacking.

The city had decided to send some of its troops over to Barbra in light of the recent events that had occurred, and it went without saying that sending the more ill-mannered individuals was nothing short of a horrible idea. Hence, Ulmutt’s higher ups had ended up deciding to send over most of their harder workers, the people that normally made up the backbone that supported most of the city’s regular guard-related activities.

As a result, the less well mannered guards usually responsible for rounding up criminals and subjugating magic beasts outside the city’s walls were tasked with helping with maintaining public order. As a result, the town had, in general, gotten a lot less secure. In fact, the guards themselves ended up bringing about a fair amount of trouble.

“The men we sent to Barbra will be returning in due time. The Guildmaster and several other high ranking adventurers are helping us keep everyone in line for the time being, so everything’s still thankfully under control.”

“Still, it’d be best for you to be careful. It was honestly very difficult for us to

immediately see you as an adventurer. We wouldn't have believed you if not for your guild card, and I'm sure there will be others that not only feel the same, but are more stubborn in their ways."

"I think you're probably the youngest adventurer to have ever tried entering the eastern dungeon."

"...And you're registered. Your guild card should now log the dungeon's info."

"Log?"

"It'll track the floors you've visited and number of monsters you've defeated. It'll let you immediately determine whether or not you've completed a request."

Oh, nice, that sounds really convenient. It sounds like it'd make reporting subjugation requests incredibly simple. It'd also prevent people from giving false reports, not that that mattered to us seeing as how we were actually planning to do stuff the legit way anyways.

"Do pay attention to the fact that the east and west dungeons have separate trackers. Nothing done in the eastern dungeon will count towards trackers for the western dungeon and vice versa."

I guess that means we'd have to register again if we wanted to do stuff in the western dungeon too.

"And here's your card back."

"Don't push yourself too hard."

"Nn. Thanks."

Alright! It's finally dungeon time.

(Let's go.)

(Woof!)

[Be careful though. The place is supposed to be filled with traps.]

(Nn. Got it.)

You know, now that I think about it, this is actually our first time entering a more difficult dungeon all on our own. It'd be best for us to be prudent.

Having Fran die by falling in some random trap without any real warning would totally suck, so I'd really prefer for that not to happen.

[Urushi, don't warn us about any traps unless we're about to get totally screwed. We won't be able to get much training done if you do.]

(Ruff.)

The door opened as one of the guards did something with an item he happened to be holding. There seemed to be a weird flow to the magic in the door's vicinity, so he'd probably just used some sort of magic item.

We caught sight of a small shrine-like thing situated in the centre of a stone dome the moment we went through the gate.

[Is that the dungeon's entrance?]

"Small."

"Woof?"

Looking a bit closer, I noticed that the shrine's entrance contained a flight of stairs that ultimately led deeper underground. Still, the dungeon's entrance sure seemed small for how famous it was, but that didn't mean we'd be letting our guards down. A dungeon was a dungeon, after all.

Chapter 148

Disarming Traps

“Just remembered. Thought Master would refuse.”

[Refuse what?]

“C rank promotion, because will stand out.”

[Well, I guess you’re right, but I figured there wasn’t much point to it anymore. I mean, you want to participate in the martial arts tournament, right?]

“Nn.”

[Yeah. Participating will make you stand out pretty much right away anyways.]

“Right. Will stand out if achieve victory.”

[Haha. Yeah, basically.]

“Nn.”

We descended the dungeon’s stairs as we chatted. Naturally, we didn’t relax our guards while doing so.

It didn’t take long for us to arrive at the first floor’s entrance, a long, narrow passage constructed entirely of stone. It was far too short and thin for Urushi, so he had no choice but to return to his smaller size.

“Urushi. Training to fight while small.”

“Woof.”

We didn’t need to light any torches or provide any other sources of light. Luminescent moss grew on the cave’s ceiling and provided the passage with a dim glow. It didn’t

illuminate every last nook and cranny, but, was still good enough for our purposes.

[Looks like we've already hit a crossroads, and one that diverges into three different paths, at that.]

"Go down which?"

[Hmmm, well the rule says you should always go left.]

The rule I was referencing was the so left hand rule. It stated that you'd be able to find a path out of basically anything so long as you had your left hand against the wall and always turned left. I mean, it technically did work with your right hand as well, but yeah.

Naturally, the left hand rule wasn't actually perfect and didn't actually apply to every given situation. For example, it didn't work if the place we were trying to get to required us to traverse a hidden room. It also failed to apply when the place we were trying to reach was the centre as opposed to an exit, when there weren't any walls, and when we had move up and down stairs and ladders and stuff in 3D space.

Oh, and just to put this out there, we looked up all sorts of stuff so we could successfully complete our magic-beast related requests, but we didn't actually spend any time looking at the dungeon's layout, nor did we look for information pertaining to the traps within it. We figured that kind of info wouldn't actually really help us given that we were trying to train ourselves in the art of detection. The whole point was for us to locate traps and magic beasts on our own, without any extra help.

"Then will choose left."

I guess that works. I'm not really sensing any traps or magic beasts from any of the three paths right now anyways.

[Alright, let's go.]

"Nn."

We popped our detection skills and began walking down the leftmost path.

"Mmph."

[Oh?]

Fran and I simultaneously detected something around three minutes after we started moving.

“Detected.”

[So you managed to pick it up too, Fran? It looks like a Shadow Snake to me.]

“Over there.”

A single black snake was hidden away in a dark corner that the luminescent moss’ light failed to reach. It was quite difficult to notice, and almost seemed as if it was blending into the shadows. Its name made me think it could use dark magic, but it couldn’t. It was instead something that stemmed from how it it slithered around in the darkness.

“Weakling.”

“Woof.”

[Yeah. It is kind of the first thing we’ve run into though.]

It was about the same size as a Japanese rat snake, and had basically no offensive prowess whatsoever. Shadow Slip and Presence Detection skills aside, it was basically just a normal snake. Honestly, it would probably never be able to harm you so long as you just wore yourself a pair of boots.

To be frank, it was a magic beast that the average adventurer wouldn’t even bother hunting. It tasted like garbage, its magic stone was worthless, and it basically didn’t give any exp at all. To make matters worse, you actually had to go through its corpse and extract its magic stone too, a procedure that took much more time than it was worth. That said, we weren’t normal adventurers. I saw no reason to pass up a chance to potentially level up a skill while also getting free magic stone points.

And so, Fran murdered the Shadow Snake. It only ended up giving me a single magic stone point, but hey, one step at a time, right?

[Alright, let's keep going.]

“Nn.”



Time passed as we advanced.

Fran completely froze after we got a bit deeper into the dungeon.

[What's wrong?]

“Trap...?”

[Really? Where?]

“Floor. There.”

[Ohhhh. I see it now.]

Looking at the place Fran had pointed to made me feel a sense of discomfort, as if something was just the slightest bit out of place. Activating Trap Detection and staring at the area with a more discerning eye allowed me to understand that the trap I was looking at was one would activate in response to weight. Specifically, activating it would release an arrow.

Fran seemed to have noticed the trap before me as a result of the Sole Sense skill, a skill that allowed her to detect oddities through the soles of her feet. It was really quite useful, as Fran could sense the vibrations she produced while walking around, thereby allowing her to derive quite a bit of information.

It was a skill I wouldn't get any use out of unless I was dragged along the floor or walls, but that'd produce way too much noise for comfort, so yeah no.

[You want to try disarming it?]

“Nn.”

Disarming traps was honestly pretty much my speciality due to my access to

telekinesis. I could get rid of their mechanisms without much effort, and if I messed up, I could just choose to set them off from afar from without putting at us risk. That said though, we figured it'd be a good idea for Fran to get used to doing it herself as well.

[Good luck then.]

"Nn."

Fran pulled out the toolkit we got back at the Adventurer's Guild. In it, she found a pair of tweezers and a thin blade. Both items were said to be necessities for adventurers with scout-type jobs.

The toolkit also included instructions on how one would go about disarming traps, and went over several different principles. The method Fran was trying now was specifically one that made the trap harmless instead of just flat out obliterating it. That is, she would figure out how it worked before destroying one of the key mechanisms that rendered it operational as opposed to just messing the whole thing up.

The trap that the two of us were looking at right now was activated through a weight trigger. That is, applying weight to the area it which it was set would lower it, thereby pulling a wire which in turn would release an arrow from a hole in the wall to our left. As far as I could tell, there were two ways to disarm the trap. The first was to plug the hole, and the second was to carefully cut the wire.

Fran ended up deciding to go with the latter of the two options, and thrust the blade she got from the toolkit into a thin gap in the floor that lay between the activation tile and the rest of the cave.

We were still only on the first floor, so the trap was still a relatively simple one that didn't take much effort to disarm. The arrow was positioned so that it'd only hit people that were standing, so we honestly could've just crouched and had Fran press the tile in order to disarm the trap by setting it off had we been any lazier.

In fact, we didn't even actually need to disarm it. We could've just avoided the activation tile and been done with it, but we decided to go through with the entire procedure because we figured it was a good chance for Fran to get some practice in.

"...Done."

[Yup, looks like you did it.]

“Woof!”

The dungeon had the ability to repair itself, so the trap would end up getting rearming in a few hours time. In other words, we won't be able to piggyback off other adventurers. All the traps they disarmed would be back to normal by the time we reached them.

“Let's look for next trap.”

Apparently, Fran had enjoyed disarming the trap. She was scanning the area for more with an entertained expression on her face.

[Er, sure. But I think we'll have to go a bit deeper first if you want to find any.]

Why do I feel like she might end up wanting to choose a scout-related job for her next job change? Crap, what if she actually does, and stops wanting to be a swordsman?

“Trap found. Want to disarm. Okay?”

[S-Sure, go for it.]

Everything'll work out just fine, right...?

[Is disarming traps really that fun?]

“Nn!”

Fran's eyes gleamed as she approached a hole in the wall. The way she stood in front of it with her arms crossed and her expression all serious almost made it seem like she was giving off the aura of a trap craftsman.

Is she this entertained because she finds traps to be like puzzles or something?

[I guess we'll keep watch over our surroundings...]

“Woof...”

Chapter 149

An In-Dungeon Encounter

We were steadily grinding our way through the dungeon.

The first floor's traps were simple, and its magic beasts weak. Hence, we'd managed to reach the stairs leading to the dungeon's second floor whilst remaining completely unscathed.

"Hurry to second floor."

[The first floor kinda had this whole like testing ground-like feel.]

"Woof."

I mean, we were careful and all that, but holy crap that first floor was way too easy.

[Let's keep going till things start getting a bit too difficult.]

"Nn."

Welp, onto the second floor we go.

We descended the stairs while keeping an eye on our surroundings, only to find a scene that could be described as relatively familiar.

That is, Fran, Urushi and I found ourselves in a small room with three paths splitting off of it.

"Keep left?"

[Sure, why not?]

I mean, we didn't really know anything about this place, and it wasn't like we could make a more informed decision or anything, so whatever works, works.

And so, just like that, we managed to breeze our way through the dungeon's first 4 floors without even the slightest bit of trouble from any of the traps or magic beasts we ran into along the way.

We didn't run into any other adventurers either. The first couple floors didn't seem to have anything that'd provide an adventurer with any real sort of income, so most people probably just followed a map and dove straight down the shortest route or something.

Making our way through the dungeon without a map and disarming all the traps we ran into along the way filled us with a sense of idle curiosity.

The fifth floor was a slight bit different to the four that preceded it.

“ ... ”

[...]

Namely, it's traps were a tad bit more difficult to deal with; it took Fran quite a bit more time to disarm them. As a result, traversing the fifth floor ended up taking about as much time as the third and fourth put together.

“Master, trap.”

[Man, putting a trap right in front of the stairs leading to the next floor is one hell of a dick move.]

“Woof.”

[And it's a pretty difficult one to disarm too.]

I checked out its inner workings by using echolocation, and turned out it was actually fairly complex. That said though, its complexity only ended up pumping Fran up the more.

“Will do best.”

And so, Fran started tinkering with the trap with a serious look on her face. She

remained quiet throughout the process, hence causing the dungeon to be dead silent save for the trap's metallic clanking and the occasional breath.

Both Urushi and I quietly stood by and watched over her as she went about taking the thing apart.

She and I both let out a bit of a noise about five minutes after she first got to work.

“Oh.”

[Welp.]

Three arrows flew out from the ceiling, their tips aimed straight at Urushi's back.

“Whimper!”

[Are you alright, boy?]

“Woof...”

It looked like he somehow managed to dodge them in time. Well, hopefully he learns his lesson, and stays on guard from now on even if we're not actually having any sort of trouble.

“Sorry. Made mistake.”

It looked like she cut the wrong wire.

[It looks like it's much harder to deal with than the all the earlier ones. It might be a bit hard for you to disarm with it unless you get a job that enhances your ability to mess with traps.]

“Will disarm next one. Without fail.”

[Sure. I don't really see any issue with us going at it a few extra times.]

“Nn!”

Attempting to disarm more complex traps is probably a pretty good way to train up

the Disarm Trap skill anyways.

[You stay motivated too, Urushi.]

“Woof!”

Alright, let’s go down those stairs.

[Looks like the sixth floor starts off pretty much the same way as the others before it did.]

“Three paths. Still left?”

It ended up turning out that the only part of the layout that actually remained the same was the first.

The sixth floor’s traps were much more difficult to disarm, and we only managed to successfully get four out of five.

They’d also become much more deadly. The arrows were coated in poison, there was a bunch more smoke, and the pitfalls were made twice as deep. I mean, they weren’t so bad that they’d cause instant death, but they were definitely deep enough to cause quite a few serious injuries.

The magic beasts ended up getting a good bit stronger too.

“Haaah!”

[Fire Javelin!]

“Growl!”

“Nn!”

[Nice!]

The battles functioned as yet another form of practice. That is, Fran was using them in order to better her sword drawing techniques.

We faced off against assassin slimes and chameleon lizards, just to name a few. The first of the two mentioned would crawl out of cracks in the dungeon's walls in order to assault us, whereas the second would attempt to blend in with the walls themselves. All the magic beasts we met were like them, the cunning little bastards refused to play fair and kept trying to pull fast ones on us. Worst of all was the fact that most of them were ridiculously difficult to notice.

Yeah, I could totally see why training here would let you grind up your detection-based skills real quick.

That said though, they were still far from being our match. They were probably E ranked threats at best, so they didn't end up managing to put any damage on us either. Honestly, I felt like the traps were more difficult to deal with.

[The magic beasts should get stronger if we dive a bit deeper, but they honestly don't amount to much right now...]

I mean, it was still our first day here, so I didn't really see any issue with us just sitting around and practicing stuff for a bit. We might end up having quite a bit of trouble detecting some of the stuff on the lower floors, so yeah.

Well, we might as well keep going for now. We can figure out whether we want to keep going or not when we actually do start running into the more difficult to deal with magic beasts.

Only after clearing the sixth floor did we meet our first adventurer.

A half dead, bloodied young man was sitting on the dungeon's floor with his back leaning against one of its walls. A second, older man lay beside him, but unlike the first, the second had already breathed his last. Though, the first did look like he'd soon do the same if we just left him there.

It seemed he had the Appraisal Blocking skill, as I couldn't actually appraise him at all, so the only thing I could do was go off his looks, which informed me he was some sort of beastkin. I didn't really see any reason not to help him. There were three of us here, so we could easily just dispatch him if he turned out to be some sort of villain.

[Greater Heal]

“...What... just...?”

“Still alive?”

“Did... you just help... me?”

“Nn.”

“I see, thanks. W-Wait, was there anyone else, or was it just me here?”

“One more. Didn’t make it.”

“Wha!? L-Leader!! Why did it have to come to this...?”

The beastkin boy began to cry as he clung to the corpse of the man he called his leader.

“Uuu...”

Fran immediately raised me and pointed me towards him. Her actions were merciless but also absolutely necessary.

“No evidence you didn’t kill him.”

There was always the possibility that the boy was just acting, and that he was a thief that’d traded fatal blows with the now-dead man. I mean, he looked like his feelings were genuine, but we couldn’t appraise him, so we couldn’t let our guard down.

“So you’re an adventurer too? You’re... so much more amazing than me.”

“Give answer.”

“I don’t know how I can make you possibly believe me, but he and I really were friends...”

[He isn’t lying.]

“Nn. Got it.”

“You’ll believe me?”

“Can tell is truth by looking.”

The boy seemed relieved despite the fact that we’d just totally flat out bullshitted him; he breathed a sigh as he unsteadily rose to his feet.

“Thank you.”

“...What happened?”

I kind of pity him, but I felt it was important for us to figure out exactly what happened.

The boy responded to Fran’s inquiries and slowly began filling us in on everything. The party he’d been a part of had been composed of four F rankers, an E ranker, and a D ranker.

They’d finished collecting all the materials they’d sought out to, and were on their way back.

“But we were suddenly attacked.”

“Magic beast?”

“Humans. Magic beasts wouldn’t be able to wipe out a party of six even if they did get the jump on them, not on this floor. The people that attacked us were evil adventurers, thieves.”

Yeah, I figured there’d be people who did stuff like that.

The boy’s party had heard rumours of adventurers acting as thieves. They were also aware that the guild had even stated that bringing those guilty of the act would be rewarded. Hence, the boy’s party had been all gung ho about eliminating them, but they ultimately ended up finding themselves outmatched.

“They used traps to get rid of two of us right off the bat, then killed another two of our other members in the surprise attack that followed. There were still two of us left afterwards, but we weren’t able to do anything against the three thieves we were against. Leader had somehow managed to use a Teleportation Feather by mustering up the last of his strength. The two of us should’ve been able to teleport out...”

“Just you and leader here.”

“I see...”

“Attackers, what kind of people?”

“Their faces were masked, and their equipment didn’t really have any distinguishing features... so the only thing I know is that they were a group of four, and that they were all men.”

Hmm... what do? I mean, we could just have Solas, the boy, head towards the exit on his own, but he’d probably die if left all by himself. We kinda went out of our way to save him, so I don’t really want to just let him roll over and die after the fact.

In the end, we decided to accompany him back to town. I mean, a pretty fair distance for just a single day’s worth of adventuring anyways, so yeah.

“I’m sorry for causing you so much trouble.”

“Helping those in trouble, normal.”

“Thanks. I’d like to bring Leader with us too. I don’t want to let the dungeon absorb him if possible.”

The corpses of any humans and magic beasts would end up getting absorbed by the dungeon after about a day. This is only preventable by either taking the corpse outside the dungeon or dismantling it.

Soras was planning to carry the corpse out on his own, but that’d take way too long.

We might as well help him carry the leader guy out, even if we just leave the rest of his companions as is

There was no way for us to get the rest of his companions out, but I guess we might as well carry the Leader guy for him.

“Got it.”

“Huh? What just...”

“Dimensional storage.”

“Oh! That’s amazing! I don’t think I’ve ever seen it before!”

“Nn. Go.”

“Ah, yeah, wait up!”

And so, Fran started climbing back up the stairs with Leader’s corpse in tow.

Chapter 150

Attackers

We led Solas back to surface by retracing the path we took on our way down. We had healed him, but he was still missing quite a bit of blood so I figured his pace would be a rather slow one. Contrary to my expectations, however, he was still moving along fairly steadily regardless.

I'd honestly just kinda ended up assuming that he was an F ranker because he said his party was comprised of D, E and F ranked adventurers, but he seemed to at least be as good as an E ranker.

"Hey Fran, are you using some sort of detection type skill? It sure seems like it. I've only got Presence Detection myself."

"Nn."

Solas seemed to be the boisterous type. He more or less kept talking and wouldn't shut up despite the fact that all Fran really ever did in response to his rambling was nod.

We were able to progress up through the dungeon fairly quickly due to the fact that the traps we disarmed had yet to be restored. I wasn't sure if everything would stay disarmed long enough for us to break through the fifth and sixth floors, but I sure hoped that would end up being the case, as the traps therein were more difficult to deal with.

Two men appeared in front of us as we continued to make our way towards the exit.

"Hey there."

"Nn. Hi."

"Huh...? Are you two by yourselves?"

"That's impossible. They're just kids. There's no way two kids would be able to make

it this deep by themselves.”

“R-Right, good point. So where’s your party at?”

Both men seemed rather surprised that Fran and Solas appeared to be travelling alone. I couldn’t really blame them. They were really quite justified if one was to take the norm into account. That said though, they soon regained their calm after asking us a few questions.

“So you two really are all by yourselves?”

“And you’re adventurers?”

“Is that wolf your familiar?”

“Feel free to stick with us for a bit if you got separated from the rest of your party members.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea!”

“Right? Come on, let’s go.”

They seemed like good guys that were concerned about Fran and Solas...

Not.

A quick appraisal immediately informed me that they were about as villainous as could be.

They not only had the theft, torture, threaten, and deceptions skills, but were also marked with titles claiming them to be murderers.

My immediate guess was that their strategy was to approach other adventurers in an amicable manner and attack them the moment they let their guards down. You would normally think that dungeon cards could totally be used to prove that one had killed another adventurer seeing as how it logged stuff, but that wasn’t the case. They only recorded monster kills and couldn’t be used to prove whether or not one was committing crime within the dungeon’s confines.

I felt another person sneak up behind us as I contemplated whether these guys were the same group that attacked Solas' party — not that it really mattered. In either case, they were enemies we had to defeat, and that was that.

[Be careful Fran, these guys are thieves.]

(Nn.)

(Woof?)

[What's the matter, boy?]

(Woof woof?)

Apparently, he was questioning why I'd used appraisal, given that Dias had literally just warned us to be more prudent in its use.

He had a point, but I quickly justified to him my actions. That is, Dias' warnings more so pertained to cases involving royalty, namely in public situations. He also basically more or less explained that other people would also sometimes get mad when appraised because it was seen as a breach of etiquette in general. One of his other key points was that using it under certain circumstances could also get you caught up in some sort of ploy or conspiracy if you weren't careful.

Dungeons, however, detailed a whole different scenario. You couldn't really not use Appraisal in dungeon-based settings seeing as how it was pretty common for one to run into idiots like these guys. If anything, using it was more natural than not. You'd really need to be a special type of stupid to unconditionally trust someone you just met, especially if that someone happened to have a weapon.

The only thing you could get out of calling breach of etiquette under such a circumstance would honestly be suspicion. It is possible for something unfortunate to come out of indiscriminately using Appraisal even in a dungeon, but that'd only happen if the other party happened to have some super rare skill that happened to damage those that tried to appraise them. Even then, I'd honestly say that appraising them would probably still be worth the risk.

I wouldn't mind being on the receiving end either. That is, I'd think it fair and not complain if someone wanted to appraise us in order to trust us if we happened to meet

them in the middle of a dungeon.

[That's just how it is, so don't worry about it.]

I finished explaining my thoughts to Urushi right about when the men began getting impatient at the fact that Fran had remained silent.

"So? Where yo party at?"

One of the men began talking in a rougher tone, as if he couldn't keep his act up any longer.

"Nn?"

[Fran, try leaving one of them alive if you can. Preferably whichever one seems to be in charge.]

(The rest?)

[It'd be too much of a pain in the ass to take them all back into the city with just us here, so you can just cut them up if you want.]

(Nn. Got it.)

[Their stats aren't too low, so be careful. Urushi, you be in charge of guarding Solas.]

(Growl!)

Though even with that said, I honestly couldn't shirk off the possibility that these men weren't the same group that had attacked Solas. They could've just been former villains that had already been rehabilitated into upstanding citizens. The chance of such a scenario was incredibly small, but there nonetheless, so I honestly hoped for them to make the first move, just in order to confirm that they really were villains.

Fortunately, their next actions almost seemed to function as a response to that hope of mine; one of the men lost his patience and began attacking us.

"Ugh, whatever, enough of this shit already."

The person who spoke seemed to be a leader, and his words some sort of signal. The man that'd been sneaking up behind Fran immediately drew his a dagger and dashed towards her at an incredible speed.

Although the attacker was just a thief, I had to admit that he wasn't all that bad at combat. Specifically, I felt that he deserved praise for remaining cautious. He didn't let his guard down around Fran despite her being a young girl, he remained vigilant and tried to deliver a blow that would hinder any future actions as opposed to one that would slay her in one strike. In other words, he didn't fully commit himself to the engagement and tried to make sure that he'd be able to withdraw if he wasn't able to accomplish his objective.

[He's a careful one, but not nearly careful enough.]

"What!?"

I stopped the man's dagger in place, and sliced his neck open with wind magic before he was able to recover from the shock of his arm suddenly losing all its momentum and freezing in place.

"Huh!? What!?"

Solas was left completely bamboozled as the situation continued to rapidly change.

"Daz!"

"Guah!"

Fran sliced one of the men into pieces, and sent the other flying by batting him with the flat of my blade.

"Gruaaahh!"

The man that got sent flying had so much momentum that he ended up cracking the wall he was smashed against. His arms and ribs both looked like that'd immediately been broken. His spine looked like it'd seen much better days as well.

"Why..."

“Too obvious.”

“Fuck’n... ‘ell...”

The man responded to Fran with a frustrated groan before finally losing consciousness.

(Master, what now?)

[Let’s head back into the city for now so we can hand the guy we just captured off to the guild. You get rewarded for turning him in, remember? We can probably get him to tell us who he’s working with while we’re at it.]

Solas approached the man while we were figuring what to do with him and immediately swung his sword without even the slightest shred of hesitation.

His action and Fran’s response to it caused a metallic clang to ring through the dungeon’s corridors.

The man we painstakingly refrained from killing would’ve ended up six feet under had Fran not used me to stop Solas’ strike.

“Explain?”

“S-Sorry, seeing him again just made me want to...”

It turned out that these guys really were the ones that’d attacked Solas and his party. He ultimately ended up lowering his sword, but continued to fiercely glare at the scumbag we had just captured regardless.

Chapter 151

Skill Related Suspicion

We started moving back towards the city immediately after eliminating the thieves that'd attacked us.

Solas had asked to let him take up the lead, to which we raised no objections.

It felt like a much better idea to keep him as far away from our captive as possible, just in case he felt like murdering him again. Apparently, the men had still been holding onto the items they stole from Solas' party, so we retrieved them and stuffed them inside of Solas' Item Box.

We'd been unable to discern his skills because he had Appraisal Blocking, but it turned out that he was a scout-like kinda guy. He'd occasionally find traps and move to avoid them.

That said though, it didn't seem like he was skilled enough to notice and avoid all of them.

"Woof!"

[Huh?]

"Urushi?"

"Woof."

An arrow shot out of the ceiling and made its way towards Urushi, but the large wolf had managed to grab the projectile with his mouth before it hit him. Dat reaction speed though.

"Okay?"

"Growl!"

“S-Sorry, my bad.”

Solas immediately apologized for missing the trap. I couldn’t blame him though. He was in a bit of a rush, so he seemed less on guard than he otherwise would have been. Plus, it’s not like we pick up on every single trap either.

Hmmmmmm... Though, for some odd reason, I felt a sudden sense of discomfort, as if something was out of place... It was almost like a jolt of electricity had run through my brain — not that I actually had one in the first place.

[Hmmm...]

(Master? Something wrong?)

[I’m not quite sure how to put it, but... I feel like something’s not right.]

(Nn?)

[Like, do you feel like anything’s just a bit off?]

(Hm?)

[What about you, Urushi?]

(Woof?)

Was I just imagining things?

“I’m really sorry, I just set off another trap.”

Oh! There it is again...

[How about just now?]

(Nn?)

(Woof?)

Neither Fran nor Urushi were able to feel what I was feeling, despite the fact that it was pretty much the same as the feeling I got when I sensed magic beasts and traps and whatnot. Hm... Weird, I don't get it.

[Oh well, whatever, let's just keep going.]

"Nn."

"Um, are you okay?"

"Unharmed."

"Whew, good..."

Solas came to a sudden stop after we advanced a bit further.

Did something happen?

"There's something over there."

"Nn? Where?"

"Over there."

I couldn't see anything in the direction Solas was pointing. I mean, he wasn't wrong though. My senses were telling me that there was some sort of trap there, but I couldn't figure out what it was. That odd sensation of something being off was back too.

"It's literally right there. You know what, come on, let's go check it out."

Huh... It just happened again. Yeah, alright. I'm definitely not imagining it.

That said though, I wasn't given any time to figure out why I'd been feeling it to begin with, as Solas had immediately dashed forwards without waiting for Fran to first respond to him. Four small holes opened up around us and immediately began to emit a sort of mist. There was one above, one under, and one on either side.

The mist was something that our skills rendered completely invalid: poisonous gas.

“Ah! My bad!”

It looked like Solas had accidentally stepped on the trap’s activation switch. Seriously, holy crap, why is he messing up this much? Like, even given the current circumstances, he really shouldn’t be.

“A-Are you okay?”

We couldn’t actually see him because of all the poison that got emitted, but we could still hear his voice.

And along with said voice once again came that odd sense of incongruity.

It seemed like it was something I’d feel whenever he spoke. Wait, could it be that this is what Dias described as the odd sensation you’d get when someone used a skill on you? Wait, that’d have to mean that Solas was using some kind of skill...

On us.

Doubts began flooding my mind the moment I came to that realization, as if they’d broken through and burst out of a dam.

At first, he said that he was attacked by 3 people, but he later went on to say that there were 4 thieves. At the time, I’d ignored it because I thought to be an honest mistake, but it looked like I messed up. I trusted someone I just met despite not being able to appraise them. Why the hell?

He’d also said that the men that attacked him were masked, but he managed to recognize them immediately. Like, how? That just flat out didn’t make sense.

I also don’t understand how I didn’t catch the fact that him asking us questions nonstop was actually just him probing our skills and whatnot.

He kept activating traps, and even tried to kill the man we captured to top it all off. Like holy crap, he’s suspicious as all hell.

The only reason I trusted him was because the Principle of Falsehood hadn’t told me that he was lying, because he technically wasn’t.

An incredibly powerful sense of discomfort assaulted me, one much greater than all the others I'd felt before it. Why had we treated someone that we'd met less than an hour ago like a companion? And as if it was natural too.

The answer to that question was one that I simply could not explain. My guess was that Solas had done something to us, but I couldn't figure out what, and also still couldn't help but have the sneaking suspicion that I was wrong about this whole thing.

Solas was definitely suspicious, but we had no solid evidence that he was the one behind all this...

[Fran, don't respond to him.]

(?)

[Just do as I'm about to tell you.]

Fran followed my instructions and took a knee. Likewise, we had Urushi "collapse" on the ground. Naturally, the two were both just acting.

If Solas really was what I thought he was, then he'd probably try something — not that he'd actually be able to harm us. I could activate Telekinesis literally instantly, and I'd already cast Chronos Clock, a Dimensional Magic spell, on both Fran and Urushi. The spell allowed the two to interpret Solas' actions in slow motion, and thus retaliate should he try something.

Chronos Clock's biggest disadvantage was the fact that his words would get slowed down as well, so they wouldn't be able to figure out what he was saying, hence why I didn't cast the spell on myself as well.

"Did you just use some sort of magic...?"

"..."

"Fran? Are you okay?"

It seemed he sensed that we'd cast a spell. I guess casting Chronos Clock wasn't exactly the best idea, but better safe than sorry.

“Ugh...”

“Hmm, so you used some sort of magic, but weren’t able to prevent yourself from being poisoned?”

“Uu.”

Fran was showing off her acting skills by pretending to be in pain.

“It looks like you really have been poisoned. Don’t worry, I’ll help you make it so it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

He still wasn’t lying, but his actions served to contradict his words. That is, he’d drawn the blade at his waist and swung it in Fran’s direction.

Actually, thinking about it, what he said was cliché, but it wasn’t wrong. Killing someone was indeed a way to prevent them from feeling any further pain.

“Nn.”

“What!? How!? That shouldn’t be possible!”

“Fmmph!”

“Guahhh!”

Fran easily dodged his blade, drew me, and performed a pair of slashes. The first removed his right hand from the wrist down, and seperated him from his sword. The second caused him to part with his right leg.

“W-What...”

Solas, who’d collapsed, looked up at us with an expression filled but with shock.

There wasn’t any way for Fran to converse with him while she was still under the effects of Chronos Clock, so I undid the spell and let her talk.

“First. Deactivate Appraisal Blocking.”

Chapter 152

Solas

We quickly threw a heal at Solas, who was still collapsed on the ground and unable to rise to his feet. He lost both an arm and a leg; his injuries were far too serious for a single heal to fix, but we didn't really care. All we needed was for him to stop bleeding so we could question him.

"..."

His expression remained constant throughout the process. That is, he simply continued to glare in Fran's direction.

"First. Deactivate Appraisal Blocking."

"What?"

"Playing dumb. Pointless."

"...I see. You must have Appraisal then."

"Nn."

"And what if I say no?"

His expression was filled with a sort of strength, one that left me confused as to whether he was trying to negotiate or just flat out defy us for the sake of it. Either way, we didn't care. We weren't planning to really negotiate with him in the first place.

What we needed to do was figure out what the skill he was using on us was.

"Will keep hitting, but won't kill. Can use healing magic, won't allow suicide."

"..."

Fran's lack of an expression was pretty nice to have at times like this. It made her sound completely serious — not that we weren't actually completely serious anyways.

Solas seemed to have sensed it, as his eyes had immediately began expressing his fear.

"...You'll at least let me live, right?"

I felt something again the moment he spoke in that probe-like manner. The sensation I felt this time, however, was a bit different than usual. It was much more clear. I could immediately tell that Solas had done something to us.

The sensation was very much akin to having someone stroke my blade, it was one that was simply impossible for me to ignore.

I was pretty sure that Malice Perception, Crisis Detection, Magic Detection, and Presence Detection were all working in conjunction in order to allow me to sense that he'd used a skill on us.

[Fran, did you feel anything just now?]

"?"

[What about you, Urushi?]

(Woof?)

Neither of the two could sense anything at all. Why was I the only one capable of picking this up? My immediate guess was that it was probably because I had the Sorcery skill, and that it made me better at picking up on magical energy and the flow thereof. If that is indeed the case, then I guess that just means that I'm just better at picking up magic-related stuff, kinda like how Fran's better at picking up stuff that involves using the five senses.

(Something done to us?)

[I think so.]

"Nn."

Fran nodded and stabbed me straight through Solas' back.

"Giiiiiihfff!"

It was a well aimed thrust; I went right through his lungs. If Solas were an ordinary person, he probably would've died just then. Him being an adventurer only prolonged his pain. The fact that he wasn't weak disallowed him from even fainting. He was forced to endure an exorbitant amount of pain as blood spewed from his lips.

"Hiiigiiiigiiiiihh!"

"Middle Heal"

"Ugh..."

Being healed caused Solas to fall into despair. Only then did he realize just how far she was willing to take this.

"Will not allow any actions until Appraisal Blocking deactivated."

"Growl."

"Ha... Ha..."

I couldn't tell whether it was because he started getting scared, or whether it was just because we'd stabbed him through the lung, but Solas' breath gotten all ragged. He didn't bother putting up a front any longer. He hadn't removed his gaze from Fran, but tears had welled up in his eyes.

"I-I get it, I get it! I'll deactivate the skill. It's one of my equips, so you'll have to let me take it off! Give me just a second!"

He brought his hand out in front of him and bit down on his ring in an attempt to take it off. Apparently that was what was stopping us from appraising him.

Oh right, we chopped off his other arm so he can't really take it off normally, can he?

That said though, it refused to budge, which kinda did make sense. Rings were like that. They'd get stuck if you gained even the slightest bit of weight.

“Haa... mmmphhh...”

However, Fran wasn't what you'd call the patient type. Seeing him fiddle around with it only served to annoy her.

“Enough.”

“Whagyaaa!!”

Solas lifted his head with a bit of a stupid look on his face in response to her words, only to immediately lose his finger. Fran finished everything up nice and quick by severing it before he had much of a chance to protest against her actions. The man had naturally let out a scream in pain, but I didn't really mind it too much. I was more so focused on admiring Fran's technique. She'd managed to separate him and his finger without causing even the slightest bit of damage elsewhere.

“Heal.”

“Hiii hiii”

The only comment I had was that it was a shame the ring had been broken — not that it was even the slightest bit Fran's fault. It seemed like the ring was the disposable type of equip. It was made to break the moment it was removed. That said though, it was still pretty worthwhile an item seeing as how it prevented people from appraising you and all.

General Information

Name: Solas

Age: 33

Race: Beastman/Red Cat Tribe

Job: Labyrinth Scout

State: Normal

Status Level: 34

“HP: 208

MP: 187

STR: 101

VIT: 98
AGI: 187
INT: 111
MGC: 84
DEX: 191

Skills

Assassination: Lv 3
Acting: Lv 6
Espionage: Lv 6
Deception: Lv 5
Presence Detection: Lv 3
Silenced Actions: Lv 4
Dagger Techniques: Lv 3
Dagger Arts: Lv 6
Throwing: Lv 4
Poison Resistance: Lv 3
Magic Detection: Lv 2
Trap Detection: Lv 6
Trap Disarming: Lv 6
Vitality Manipulation

Unique Skills

Coerced Camaraderie: Lv 6

Titles

Traitor
Murderer

Huh, he seemed decently strong, and his skill levels weren't too bad either. In fact, he looked like he could be a C ranker if he wanted.

[He's got a unique skill, it looks like. Coerced Camaraderie, apparently.]

"Coerced Camaraderie? Effects?"

"Err... that, right, yeah, that! I'll answer you, so lower your sword and have your wolf back off a bit already!"

“Growl.”

Okay, he seriously needs to just get to the point. We don’t have time to listen to him rabble on and on forever.

“It’s just a boring little skill that’ll make people think of me as a friend or comrade. It lowers the target’s guard and makes them less doubtful of what I do. It’s nothing special. I can’t use it to make people treat me like their best friends or lovers.”

Ah, so that’s it. That’s why we didn’t suspect him, or rather, that’s why we thought we were just imagining the fact that he was acting suspiciously.

“It’s a skill that’ll undo its effects the moment you happen to have any strong doubts.”

“Used skill to infiltrate adventurer parties and attack companions?”

“Pretty much.”

I figured that was the case. My guess was that he’s been popping traps and whatnot on people here for quite some time already.

“Any other companions?”

“None. Just the people you killed.”

[That’s a lie right there.]

“Lies. How many total?”

Fran pointed me right at Solas’ face.

“Do you... happen to have a skill that detects lies too?”

“Nn.”

“Man, I was being extra cautious of that too...”

Ah, I see, I see. He had Appraisal Blocking and Coerced Camaraderie. He’d be able to

basically come off clean so long as he stayed vigilant of any lie detecting skills.

Now that I think about it, he was always speaking kinda ambiguously. His answers, for the most part, could've been taken both ways. They'd technically be right regardless of how we interpreted them. Moreover, Coerced Camaraderie would do to most people what it did to us, and make it so that said ambiguous answers were regarded as ones that affirmed his innocence.

The Principle of Falsehood was honestly a pretty useful skill, but we couldn't really be relying on it all the time. We needed to be more careful about the manner in which we asked questions, else risk having this, or something like this, happen again. Learning that here and now was honestly one huge gain on our part.

"Two choices. Answer honestly now. Answer honestly after torture."

"I have four other subordinates!"

"Nn."

I'm glad he was all honest and what not, but... seriously? He was the guy leading all the thieves this whole time?

"Where?"

"...They should be at the guild."

Solas' role was to find targets for the rest of his teams. He'd usually go after parties on the rise, people who were earning a fair amount of cash and acting all gung ho about it. Very few would be suspicious of parties like that suddenly going missing seeing as how they usually had the tendency to act rather recklessly.

He'd reach out about once a month, and even then, his lackies wouldn't actually act every single time. They were cautious and did their best to ensure that there wouldn't be any rumours about how the parties Solas joined would vanish.

Alright, I guess we'll have Solas take us to the rest of his companions. Gotta take out the trash and whatnot, you know?

[Hmmm, you see, we've got a bit of a problem. He knows a lot about our skills and

stuff. I'm not sure letting him go free is that good of an idea. He might go around telling other people about us. What do you think we should do?]

(Kill.)

[Hmm... I mean, I guess that works, but...]

We would be able to get a good amount of info out of his lackies, but there's probably some stuff that only he, as their boss, knows as well. You know, like where he stores his loot and stuff.

[Actually, hold up. Don't kill him just yet. There's something I want to try.]

We should be fine so long as we stop him from leaking anything about us.

"Won't inflict any more pain if taken to their location."

"Alright, I got it..."

"But only on one condition. Will form contract."

"Contract? You can use contract magic?"

"Can't say anything about us. Leaking information means death. Must agree to contract terms."

"I'll take it!"

Yeah, I figured he'd say that. He'd die if he didn't, soooo, yeah.

"Then will create contract."

Chapter 153

Erza Is Willing

We had a pretty easy time getting back up to the surface.

Solas had spent the rest of the trip wrapped up in some of my threads and strapped to Urushi's back. We only healed him to the point of necessity; we closed his wounds and stopped him from bleeding anymore, but that was pretty much it.

Fran had also stripped him of all his armour and even covered his face with a cloth in order to make sure that his companions wouldn't be able to recognize him on sight. He'd already told us everything we wanted to know, so we'd also gagged him in order to prevent him from speaking. We figured that we might as well bring him all the way over to the guild. It was impossible for anyone to tell that the person we had bagged was Solas, but we kinda just sorta really stood out anyways.

"O-Oi oi, did something happen?"

"Was it serious?"

"Sure looks it. I wonder if everything's alright."

"Looks like someone's gotten themselves a pretty serious injury."

The gazes of the people around us immediately locked on to us the moment we left the dungeon. The guards had begun rushing our way as well.

Welp, it doesn't look like we'd be able to get out of this by making any sort of excuse, so I guess we'll have to tell the truth. That said though, we still wanted to keep attention to a minimum in order to prevent Solas' lackies from getting away.

"Got attacked during return trip."

"Woof."

The people around us immediately started to make a fuss the moment Fran informed the soldiers of our circumstances.

“She did *that* to the person that attacked her?”

“Man, she’s merciless.”

I feel like we gave the people around us a bit more of a scare than we should’ve, though I guess it can’t really be helped seeing as how our wolf companion was kinda dragging a person with severed limbs around like a piece of luggage. The fact that we’d hidden his face away didn’t really help our case much either.

You know, now that I think about it, the way we’re going about this has a bit of a homicidal kinda feel to it, so I can kinda see why people are getting freaked out.

“Oh, you were attacked by thieves?”

“Nn.”

“Nice job there! Both you and your doggy did hella good.”

That said though, the only people that got freaked out were the general populace’s members. The adventurers and guards actually seemed to view our actions in a favourable light. To them, thieves and the like were vicious criminals whose actions verged on the unforgivable.

I thought that they might end up being rather suspicious of us, but Fran’s outward appearance manage to dissuade those who did and made everyone view us in a bit more favourable a light. They seemed to think that there was no way such a young girl would lie about capturing a thief, especially if she had him in tow. Moreover was the fact that going to the guild would allow verification of our claim’s authenticity. A few soldiers ended up offering to accompany us to that end.

“Are you planning to head back over to the guild?”

“We’ll escort you over if so.”

Them accompanying us was an action that’d kill two birds with one stone; they’d be able to escort and monitor us simultaneously. Honestly, we didn’t mind it at all. In fact,

we were happy to have them accompany us, as it'd help save time. It'd make it so we wouldn't have to stop to explain our circumstances every single time we came across a guard.

We happened to encounter Erza on our way back. He'd ran over because he'd heard something had happened, and was a bit concerned about all the fuss.

He'd initially assumed that Fran had been arrested, and started giving one of the soldiers a really hard time.

"Are you okay, Fran!?"

"Nn."

"Whew, thank god~ Were you afraid?"

"Perfectly fine."

"Fufufu, you sure are a strong one. So I'm guessing that's the scummy thief that attacked you?"

"Yup."

Erza sent a hateful gaze in Solas' direction. It was one filled with such an immense amount of rage that it caused its target to tremble despite him not being able to see it.

The raging bisexual lowered his lips to Solas' ears before whispering a single line.

"How wonderful."

"Hiii..."

"I would've smashed you to bits had you given her even the slightest scratch."

We decided not to tell Erza about the fact that he'd made us inhale a decent bit of poison. I feel like the he'd go on a total rampage if we did, and we kinda couldn't have Solas dying on us right here and now since we still needed him to verify if we got the right people when we hunted them down.

Actually, that might not be that much of a problem, if any at all...

[Hey Fran, what do you think of asking Erza to help us round up Solas' lackies?]

(Nn. Good idea.)

[I mean, there's a good chance that Erza knows what they look like. He's pretty damn strong too, so he shouldn't have any issues on that end of the spectrum. It'd be far more likely to succeed than us dragging Solas around everywhere looking for them too.]

We were attracting a fair bit more attention than I'd initially been suspecting. I wasn't actually all that keen on heading over to the guild as we were now. It didn't seem like that great an idea.

It seemed like us meeting Erza here was actually a lucky break on our parts.

"Erza."

"Sup~ Did you need something?"

"Want favour."

"Sure, leave it to me!"

"Didn't tell any details yet."

"Doesn't matter, just leave it to me. I'll do whatever you want me to. What do you need? Want me to help you tap the Guildmaster because he's pissed you off? Or maybe punish the guards that've been bullying you?"

Oh god, was that a joke? Please tell me it was. He looks hella serious, but *please* tell me it was just the kind of joke homos like to make.

For fucks sake, this guy makes me feel so creeped out that I get the chills despite being a god damn sword!

Fran, however, seemed not to mind even in the slightest. She simply conveyed her request to Erza in her usual indifferent tone.

“Need help capturing this man’s companions.”

“Mhmm~”

Erza’s eyes sparkled like those of a dragon that’d found itself some prey as Fran told her the lackies’ names and features.

“Will leave to you.”

“Ufufu~ I just have to not kill them, right? That’ll take a bit of effort.”

“Nn. No issues so long as reward.”

“Got it. I’ll personally give you a reward if you don’t end up getting one from the guild.”

That uh, no. We didn’t mean that. We just want to take them alive so we can have them tell us where they keep their loot and fess up about all the stuff they’ve done.

“I’ll be off then!”

“Nn. Do best.”

No, Fran, no. Please don’t tell *him* of all people to do his best. That just won’t turn out right.

“Ufufufufu! Hearing you cheer me on makes my bravery and vigour increase a hundred fold! Of course, the same goes for my love too. I’ll be back soon, I’ll catch them right away!”

The manwoman ran off like a gale before Fran had a chance to tell him to take it easy on Solas’ companions.

[Uh...]

(Master?)

[It’s nothing, don’t worry.]

“Woof.”

I hope he doesn’t mess them up *too* much. It’d be nice if they were at least still recognizable by the time he was done with them.

Chapter 154

Reeling Them All In At Once

It took us a fair chunk of time to rush our way over to the guild. We'd already figured out to get between the guild and the dungeon's entrance, and hence, it normally would have only taken us about 5 minutes to get ourselves all the way over, but we had to keep pace with the guards that'd accompanied us, so it ended up taking a whole 30.

"We're... finally here..."

"Woof."

"Nn."

The soldiers that'd accompanied us were panting heavily. It seems we might've been moving around just a bit too quickly for them. That said though, our thoughts weren't really with them. Both Fran and I were instead wondering whether or not Erza had managed to successfully catch all of Solas' companions.

"Gyaaa!"

"H-Help! Please, help!"

Okay yup, Erza be on a rampage.

"Oh, hey Fran~ Welcome back~"

"Nn. Them?"

"Yup yup they are. We've got all the evidence we need, so I'm in the middle of giving them just a little bit of punishment."

"We'll tell you whatever you want!"

"I'll tell you everything I've ever done wrong, so please, no more!"

Three men were crouching with their thighs shut closed together. The last was, for some odd reason, collapsed face up with both hands on his ass.

“You naughty little boys were attacking other adventurers in the dungeon, weren’t you?”

“W-We were!”

“So, you have a boss? Someone must be giving you orders, and someone must’ve brought that whole idea up to begin with.”

“W-We do have one.”

“Who?”

“U-Uh, that’s...”

“If we talk, we’ll...”

“Oh? You’re more afraid of him than me? I guess I must need to punish you guys a bit more~”

“Hiiii! Please, no! It’s Solas! Our leader is Solas, an E ranked adventurer!”

“He’s actually much stronger than he seems! He could probably take a D ranker head on if he wanted!”

“He’ll kill us all in just the blink of an eye!”

It seemed that they were absolutely terrified of Solas, though I guess I could see why. He was not only fairly skilled, but also capable of pulling off scummy moves in a calm manner. It seemed that he’d always been the more cautious type of criminal too, so, those that knew of his actions probably thought him to be some ridiculously evil criminal mastermind.

“That won’t happen. He’s already been captured too, right Fran?”

Well then. Looks like Erza had us totally figured out.

The entire guild seemed to turn their gazes in our direction the moment the manwoman called us out.

“Wait, is that supposed to be...?”

“The rumoured D ranker...?”

“A black catkin...?”

“H-How adorable...”

It didn't seem like most people were looking at us favourably. Their gazes seemed to contain more curiosity, doubt, and lust than anything else.

“Nn. This.”

“Thankies.”

Erza lifted the cloth that covered Solas' face and caused his companions to start screaming. They were completely blown aback by the shock of seeing the man that had always ordered them around in such a helpless state.

“T-That's Solas?”

“D-Do you think Erza got him?”

“Seriously?”

“It was Fran that caught him.”

“Nn. While on way back.”

“She is a D ranker you know? And a really strong one too.”

“Haaah?”

“What're you saying?”

“There’s no way a little girl like her could’ve caught Solas.”

Eh, I figured this would happen, and I honestly don’t particularly care so long as we get rewarded appropriately.

Erza, however, didn’t seem to be able to find it in him to let them off.

“So you don’t believe me?”

“Hiii!”

“T-That’s not true. That’s definitely not true at all! We totally believe you!”

“Good. Oh, right, why don’t we ask Solas too. Hey Solas, who captured you?”

“F-Fran.”

“See! It’s true.”

“A-Alright.”

Erza puffed his chest up in pride in response to their claims, but it seemed that he was the only one that’d believed the men he’d coerced into agreeing with him. The people around us were still looking rather doubtful of the men’s claims.

“Where to put him?”

“Just wait around a bit. This is a pretty big deal, so the guildmaster should be right on his way.”

“Nn. Got it.”

“Do you want to do anything while you wait? Do you maybe want to drink some tea?”

“Nn.”

“Hey, you lot. Keep watch over these guys.”

“Sure thing!”

Erza led Fran over to the guild's bar and left Solas and his underlings to the adventurers that happened to be present.

I didn't really think that to be a good idea at first, but it seemed that the adventurers he'd ordered ended up taking his instructions with a surprising amount of sincerity. Though, I guess it does make sense. Erza would probably give them one hell of a harsh punishment if they let them get away and all.

Plus, we were kinda in the adventurer's guild. It was kinda impossible for them to escape given that there were adventurers all over the place.



A stack of 20 plates of cake formed next to Fran and Erza over the course of about half an hour. The two seemed to be having fun; Fran nodded along as Erza told her about all sorts of things. He was really skilled at conversation, and honestly would be super popular if he was a bit easier on the eyes. That said though, I'm not all that sure which gender he'd actually be more popular with...

As for Urushi, he was sitting off to the side happily gnawing on a fairly large bone.

"Hey, I heard something happened."

Only then did Dias finally show up.

"That was really slow of you. Were you up to something?"

"I was on patrol. What about you? You two sure seem to be having fun."

"Mhmm. We had loots."

"Oh, right. And he was the one responsible for that whole traitor ruckus?"

Dias seemed all laid back and whatnot, but I really had to give it to him. He was deserving of both his A rank and his Guildmaster title. He had no mercy for those that harmed the guild and its interests; he aimed a ridiculous amount of bloodlust in Solas' direction as he spoke.

“Hmm, I see, I see. So you’ve been committing quite the number of crimes.”

Did he just read Solas’ mind? I think he did, but he wasn’t using the skill on us, and he had a tonne of other skills that made him more stealthy and difficult to read, so it was pretty much next to impossible for me to tell. I’m going to have to work on my detection and perception type skills if I’m going to want to be able to see through him.

“And you’re the person behind it all?”

“Yuppers he is. His name’s Solas, and it looks like he was doing a pretty good job of hiding his strength up till now.”

“Really? You must be quite skilled given that your name wasn’t one I recognized. You’ve got quite the interesting skill there too.”

The fact that not even Dias knew of him meant that he really did do a pretty good job of keeping himself inconspicuous. He stayed away from all those that were actually strong and preyed on the weak whilst laying low as your everyday harmless dude.

“To him, what’ll happen?”

“Hmm, well, we’re still going to be running investigations for the time being, but, he’ll probably eventually either get put to death or end up as a slave. I’m fairly certain we’ll be choosing the execution option seeing how difficult it is to deal with that skill of his. Turning him into a slave would effectively be the same as just leaving him be. That said though, I can’t speak for the type of execution he’ll get. The two options are either for us to euthanize him or torture him to death. “

Oh wow, torturing people to death is actually a thing? Really makes me realize how dangerous a world it is out there. That said though, I do agree. He’d probably just manage to get himself released even if he did end up as a slave.

The thieves we caught had muzzles strapped to their faces, so they couldn’t actually speak. They were trying, and making “mmph” noises as a result, but everyone around them just casually ignored them.

Their fates were sealed, and that was that. However, there was a problem. Or rather, something that I thought of as wasteful.

That thing happened to be the fact that Solas' unique skill was going to go poof. Coerced Camaraderie was an incredibly useful skill. I mean, relying on it too much the way Solas did would probably get us caught, but, it's something that'd probably be difficult to detect if used sparingly. I mean, the only reason he actually got exposed was because he'd been too confident in his ability to finish us off.

I really did want the skill.

But even with that said, we weren't going to be able to get it, at least not normally. Skill Taker was going to be on cooldown for another two months, and there was no way he'd be allowed to live that long.

Wait. Right, we have three Anti-Side Effect Potions. I might be able to get Skill Taker to cool down really quickly if I use all three.

"Nn. Works."

"I'm glad you're not opposed to the idea."

"But want to speak to him later. Need to ask something before execution."

"That's fine, but, I'd prefer for you to get that done before the Martial Arts Tournament. There'll be lots of stuff for me to get ready, so I'm going to be getting fairly busy soon."

"Then will visit in ten days. Acceptable?"

"Barely, but yes. I'll talk to a few people and get the necessary arrangements out of the way."

"Nn."

"Oh right, Fran, Erza, the two of you both have the right to claim rewards for the captures you performed. How exactly would you like to sort that out?"

"I don't need anything since I was just giving Fran a bit of a hand. Do what you want Fran~"

(Master?)

[Well, just take I guess. Erza'd probably be happier if you treated him to a meal or something later instead.]

"Nn. Will gratefully accept. Will treat Erza to food later."

"Kyaahh! Really!? I'm swwwwoooo happy!"

Yup, called it. He responded by screaming in delight and wriggling his body all over.

Alright, that's that! All that's left is for us to head back to the inn and test out our Anti-Side Effect Potions.

Chapter 155

The Terror Wrought by a Skill

We went back to the inn immediately after the Guild's staff took Solas away.

Our goal was to test the Anti-Side Effect Potion and evaluate its effects.

"Master, how to use?"

[Hmmm... I dunno...]

I'd originally been thinking of creating a doppelganger and having it drink the thing, but that didn't seem like the best idea as it in no way guaranteed that my main body would also be able to receive the potion effects.

[Let's try dribbling it all over my blade. Apparently that's how the Greater Potion of Repair gets applied, so it should work.]

That said though, I wasn't actually sure whether or not the potion was supposed to have any effect on me to begin with seeing as how I was a sword.

But you know what, whatever. What's the worst that could happen? We waste a few Anti-Side Effect Potions? Yeah, that's no big deal. Screw it, poverty ahoy!

"Ready."

[Alright, do it whenever. I'm ready too.]

"Nn."

Fran opened a test-tube like bottle and dribbled its contents all over my blade.

I could feel the vivid sensation of the liquid flowing down my body, but nothing seemed to happen, even after a few seconds came to pass.

[Did that not work?]

The moment I doubted the potion was the moment in which it finally showed its effects; it made a “shwing” sound and began seeping its way into my blade.

“Master. Glowing.”

“Woof woof!”

[I guess that means it must’ve worked?]

I quickly appraised myself to check the potion’s effects.

[Sweet! It did work! Skill Taker’s cooldown got a fair chunk taken off of it!]

Its 57 day cooldown had been cut down to 37 days.

I can now use it a whole 20 days earlier, meaning, I should be able to use the skill right away if we just used the other two pots.

It seemed that Doppelganger Synthesis’ cooldown got completely reset as well. Wait, wait wait, does that mean the potion counteracts all side effects simultaneously? Thinking that, I quickly checked Self Evolution, but it didn’t seem like the magic stones points consumed by Latent Potential Awakening had returned.

It seemed that the potion could do stuff about cooldowns and whatnot, but I guess what was gone was gone. Wait, crap, that means it might not be able to counteract the recoil caused by some skills either.

“Keep going.”

[Hell yeah! Bring it!]

“Nn.”

Fran used the second potion and once again caused me to be enveloped by a veil of light.

Except... things didn’t turn out the way we thought they would.

[Huh, that's weird.]

"Something wrong?"

"Woof?"

[That one only cut the cooldown back down to 30 days.]

Apparently the pot wasn't consistent. It'd sometimes do more and sometimes do less. Is that due to the fact that each individual potion was of a different quality? Or maybe because of some sort of diminishing returns-type effect?

Hmm, what to do? We might not be able to make the 10 day deadline even if we use our last pot. I mean, we might get it if the third ends up being at least as effective as the first, but...

[Oh well, let's use it anyways.]

"Sure?"

[Yeah, I am.]

"Then will use third."

And so, we did.

[We totally failed~]

It seemed that the difference in effects stemmed from the differences in quality between each individual potion. The third was a bit better than the second, but not as good as the first. It took 12 days off the skill's cooldown.

Skill Taker still had 18 days on its cooldown; we definitely weren't going to make it in time.

Oh well, whatever. We figured out how the pots worked and cut a fair chunk out of Skill Taker's cooldown, so it's still a win in my book.

“Don’t need to steal Coerced Camaraderie.”

[Why’s that? It looks like it could be really convenient.]

“Still, don’t need. Master said Principle of Falsehood required caution, and should not use very often but used lots anyway.”

[Well... okay, yeah...]

“But mostly used to protect me from deception. Can’t be helped because I’m still weak.”

[Fran...]

“Coerced Camaraderie will be same. Will say that it will only be used in times of need, but will use lots anyway. Skills that interfere with people’s minds are scary. Remember... fat noble with Principle of Falsehood.”

[You mean August Arsand?]

Looked like she totally forgot his name already.

“August, Solas, both were messed up in the head. Most likely because of skill use. Didn’t seem like they could trust people anymore. Don’t want Master to overuse skills and be the same.”

Wow I’m pathetic. I’m supposed to be Fran’s guardian, but this is like the nth time she’s lectured me like this.

[Yeah... you’re right. Good point.]

I’m a weak person. I’d definitely lose to temptation and start using the skill left, right, and everywhere just cause it’d be convenient for me to do so. I’d probably make excuses all the time and try to justify myself too. Skills that can mess with people’s minds are terrifying. It’d be better for me not to have them in the first place.

[Alright, let’s just pretend Coerced Camaraderie never existed to begin with!]

“Nn. Good idea.”

[Let's check over all the loot we got this time around.]

"Okay."

I worked myself up whilst arranging the items we got in order to shake off the awkward mood that'd arose from our previous conversation. Fran hopped right on board and began examining the stuff I laid out.

"This one. Interesting."

[The knife? Yeah, it's got a bit of a weird shape to it.]

"Cheap product?"

[Probably, yeah.]

Everything went back to normal; we chatted as we looked over the items we took from Solas.

We were allowed to take all the items Solas and his companions had in their possession, meaning we were also granted rights to the stuff he'd stolen from the adventurers he'd recently murdered. All in all, it was quite a lot of loot.

Naturally, we decided to sell all our materials to the guild and have me absorb all the magic stones despite the fact that they were all of a rather poor quality.

Most of the equips they had were kinda bad, so we decided to get rid of them by pawning them off. Most.

They did happen to have 4 magic items. Two were trash that just gave minor stat boosts, so we completely disregarded them. The other two seemed a slight bit more useful. One was a tent that made it a slight bit harder for the people inside of it to be detected. It looked like something we could get some decent use out of if we decided to camp out in a dungeon or something like that. It wasn't all that big, but it was roomy enough to fit Fran and Urushi assuming the latter was in his smaller form.

The last item was much more interesting than any of the prior three. It was an equip meant for beast-type familiars. Specifically, it was a claw-like thing that you were

supposed to strap to their front paws.

It was made in such a way that it wouldn't hinder any of the familiar's regular activities. However, one could have claws extend from it should they charge the item with magic.

Name: Claw of Capture

Attack: 230

Mana Capacity: 100

Durability: 700

Magic Power Conductivity: D+

Skill: Stunning Strike

Huh, that's not bad. The item's attack stat was kinda low, but it was still better than the nothing he had equipped right now. Plus, that Stunning Strike skill looked like it could put out quite a decent bit of work if used right. It looked like it'd fit right into Urushi's hit and run style by augmenting his stikes with a negative status condition.

Like honestly, that's about as good an item as you could expect from a D ranked dungeon.

[Fran, have Urushi equip it.]

"Nn. Urushi, paw."

"Woof!"

"Right paw first."

"Woof."

Fran quickly strapped the leather gauntlet-like equip onto Urushi's front feet.

The first thing our wolf companion did after equipping both items was to take an imposing stance. He seemed rather proud and happy. His tail swung back and forth so quickly that it kicked up a gentle breeze.

[That suits you pretty well, Urushi.]

“Looks cool.”

“Woof woof!”

[How does it feel? Did it make walking more difficult? Are the metal parts uncomfortable at all?]

“Bark? Woof woof!”

Looked like everything fit perfectly.

[Alright! Tomorrow, we test it!]

“Nn!”

“Woof!”

Chapter 156

Side Story: Adventurers

Pathetically Stupid Blue Catkin's POV

This couldn't be happening.

It simply couldn't be real. It had to be a nightmare.

"T-Tarkas? Rawrs? Tordo? T-The hell are you guys doing?"

My three companions had collapsed right in front of me. They were missing all four of their limbs and bleeding themselves out as they cried in pain and despair.

"You bitch! The hell'd y-you do to them!?"

"..."

"You be hella open! Die asshole! Oraahhhh!"

"Nn"

"Shit! The hell!? That's impossible! Let go damn it!"

That's fuckin' just not right! The brat just stopped my club with her bare hands!? How the hell!? There's just no way! My strength matches the average D rankers, but I can't budge even the slightest bit no matter how hard I try.

"W-What kind of cowardly trick are you tryin' to pull!? There's no way someone as great as me could lose to the likes of a god damned black catkin!"

"Fmph."

"Gah!?"

I couldn't tell what happened, but both my arms and legs started to burn with a sudden intense pain. Gaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!!

It hurt so bad that I couldn't help but scream.

And then, I realized it. I'd fallen in much the same way as all my companions.

Just how did this happen? We were drinking and making merry just 10 minutes ago...



"Hey, you see that?"

"What?"

"That, over there."

"Her? Why the hell's a brat like that in a place like this?"

Tarkas made a gesture with his chin and pointed in a brat's direction. She was eating all by 'erself, and you could tell at a glance that she was at too young an age to even drink booze.

This bar be a place where adventurers gather. Brats like her are supposed to get their asses turned away at the entrance.

"Guhehehe, why don't we make like adults and give 'er a bit of a warning?"

"Heh heh heh. Adult my ass, you're getting all giddy about having the chance to make a brat bawl her eyes out."

Rawrs' had a huge smile plastered across his face. Looked like Tordo was spot on. He was probably planning to give the kid a "lesson" and then ask for some "tuition."

He started walking towards the girl, his steps unsteady with drunkenness.

"Hey brat, this ain't the type of place you should be hangin' around"

"He's right ya know? S'only a place for adventurers, not somewhere brats like you

should be hanging around.”

“ .. ”

“Oi! Say something goddammit!”

“Respond already ya damned brat.”

“ .. ”

“What? So scared that a cat’s got yer tongue?”

“That’s why you shouldn’t be coming to places like this in the first place. Now scram! Won’t hit you too hard if you do.”

“Kehihihi, think of this as a lesson kid. Not all adults are as nice as us, y’know?”

“But it goes without saying that we’ll still be charging you just a bit of tuition. But don’t worry, we’re not all that bad. You can keep your clothes, but that’s it. Hand over everything else you got.”

“Gyahahahahah! Man, we’re so nice.”

“ .. ”

“Tsk. She ain’t saying a word is she.”

“Hey Tarkas, ain’t she one of them black catkin?”

Oh man, I was so damned drunk I ain’t even noticed the black tail and ears she’s got. No doubt ’bout it, she be a black catkin.

“Geheheheh, you know what? You’re just a measly black catkin, so forget everything I just said. Give us everything you have, including everything you’re wearing.”

“Yeah, yeah, do what he says bitch. You’s just a lowly black, you’re nothing to us blues. Only reason you exist is so that we can prey on you. Black Catkin? More like wimp catkin.”

Man, we're lucky. It's like we happened across a wallet. It goes without saying that the blackies will always be inferior to us blues, and that to us, they're nothing but prey.

"Annoying. Shut up."

"Haaahh? What did you just say?"

"Shut up. Close mouth and disappear."

Did this fucking wimp catkin just talk back to me? A Blue Catkin? The nerves of this bitch. She's going to fucking pay for this!

"Y-You fucking brat! How dare a black cat like you defy us!?"

"Get on all fours and beg for your fucking life! I'll only leave you half dead if you do! You ain't fucking getting away with standing against us, you fucking wimp catkin!"

"...Mmph."

Kukuku, would you look at that. We intimidated her so badly that she can't even speak no more. She's fucking shaking in her boots, serves her right! Stupid bitch shouldn't've 'pposed us from the start! Bitch! That's what you get for trying to be more than just a slave or wallet! Still though, I'm not going to be forgiving that bitch, not at all. It's her own fault for disobeying us blue catkin!

Or so I thought, but we were never even given so much as a chance to draw our weapons.

"Blue trash cats. Live rest of lives in regret."

And then it happened, just moments after the wimp catkin spoke.

First was Rawrs. Then Tordo, Tarkas, and finally, me.

"Ugaaahhhh!"

She grabbed the club I swung with the intent to kill and severed all four of my limbs.

"Arrghghhhhhhh!"

Damn it, what's that noise? Oh, right, it's come from my very own mouth.

How the hell did it come to this? All we did was mess with a black catkin brat.

The brat stood in front of me, her eyes filled not with the hatred or bloodlust I'd been expecting, but instead with disgust. She looked at me like she was looking at a filthy roach, or mere trash by the side of the road.

"You said wimp catkin twice."

The brat swung her blade without even the slightest bit of hesitation.

"Gyahhhhh!"

This damned brat cut off my tail!! Argghhhh!!

Why did this have to happen!?



Rescued White Dogkin Man's POV

I continued to gaze at the scene before me, unable to utter even the slightest sound.

It simply seemed unreal. I couldn't believe it to be something based in reality.

I felt that even the act of recognizing it would lead to it distorting my common sense.

But I simply had to. The sounds that assaulted my eardrums and vibrations that resounded through my body informed me that it was all too real.

"Haaaah!"

"Gugyaaaaooooohhh!"

The young girl's blade split the last remaining high ogre in half.

"Are... you serious...?"

I unconsciously let out an amazed groan. How was a girl so young completely decimating a whole hoard of D ranked magic beasts in what almost appeared to be a single strike each? I couldn't help but feel that the phrase "One Hit One Kill" existed for the sole purpose of describing what I'd just bore witness to.

High Ogres were by no means weak. In fact, they were incredibly powerful. They were capable of smashing through a full suit of armour in a single hit. They regenerated ridiculously rapidly, and their skin was so hard that the average blade would find itself simply unable to pierce it.

I knew for a fact that they were strong, especially seeing as how they'd almost killed me just a few minutes back. In fact, I'd already long steeled myself for death, as my sword was unable to inflict them with any wounds whatsoever.

But then she showed up.

When she did, my heart fluttered from despair to hope, and back to despair. I'd realized that the person that came to help me was a mere little girl, a black catkin one at that.

Just think about it, one little girl against a swarm of High Ogres, this dungeon's most powerful foe. A group of five high ogres was considered a C ranked threat. There was just no way a single girl could win against them. In fact, she was probably going to get totally demolished. I didn't think she'd even be able to buy me enough time to escape.

But she did.

She killed all 5 High Ogres in just 3 minutes. It took her less time to wipe them out than it would've taken me to kill the same number of goblins.

"A black catkin kid..."

I remember hearing a rumour about her as of late.

They said that she was a D ranked adventurer that showed up in Ulmutt rather recently. That in itself was normal, Ulmutt was where all Kranzel's intermediate-ranked adventurers gathered.

But that was the only normal part about her.

The first abnormal thing about her was that she was extremely young. She was also a member of the weakest beastkin tribe, the black cat tribe, and made it so that everyone that messed with her lost the ability to remain as an adventurer. That wasn't it either. She was also diving solo as opposed to with a party, and coming out with incredible achievements regardless.

The rumours were totally absurd. I'd assumed that she'd spread them amongst the drunks herself in order to promote her name.

Besides, there was no way for Black Catkin to be anywhere even remotely close to strong in the first place. As a beastkin myself, I thought that to be common sense.

Beastkin were creatures that more or less valued strength over all else. Those that behaved poorly would be forgiven and their actions excused so long as they were strong. In other words, we were the type of creatures that would always lay blame on the weak. Such a trend was deeply rooted in our culture. Black Catkin were thought of as the weakest type of beastkin, and as a result, the ever so douchey Blue Catkin would often sell them into slavery. The fact that they were the lowest in the beastkin hierarchy was exactly that, a fact.

That's why I simply couldn't believe that a young, female black catkin could be that much stronger than me. Many other adventurers felt the same. That was why conversations about her were often centered on her tribe rather than her strength or appearance.

"I guess she must be The Black Cat that everyone's been talking about."

It looked like the rumours had been based in truth.

The girl that many had started referring to as The Black Cat didn't bother turning around to face me. It seemed that her saving me had just happened to be a little bit of an extra bonus, and that she'd only been after the High Ogres to begin with.

I myself was also a D ranked adventurer, but seeing her in action had ripped my pride to shreds.

But still, I considered myself lucky. My pride was worth much less to me than my life.

I managed to stay free of injuries and live to see another day. And on top of that, I even managed to learn that The Black Cat's strength was genuine. I'm glad I learned that here and now rather than at a bar or tavern somewhere. I surely would've messed with her had I not known that she was this powerful.

"I better make sure I tell everyone else about this. They're all just as dumb as I am, so they'll probably try messing with her if I don't."

Chapter 157

The Old White Dogkin

“Wait Fran! Hold on for just a second!”

“Nn?”

Erza called out to us as we made our way over from the inn to the dungeon.

He ran towards us with full force, his inner thighs rubbing together and his massive frame jiggling as a result of his movements.

Urushi seemed to feel the same way as me; he was lying down with his tail between his legs. His body language made it seem as if he had simply lost the will to exist because Erza did.

Fran, on the other hand, was able to maintain her composure. Man, she’s got more guts than the two of us combined.

“Erza? Need something?”

“You see, I just so happen to know someone that wants to meet and ask something of you.”

“Wants to meet me?”

“Yuppers! He’s taken an interest in you because of all the stuff he’s heard from all the other adventurers. He really wants to meet the Magic Sword Girl that everyone’s been talking about.”

“What kind of person?”

“Hmmm... well, he’s not a bad guy for sure. He used to be an adventurer, so he’s not the strict type either. He’s effectively the boss of Ulmutt’s beastkin, so it won’t hurt for you to know him.”

Erza's description made it sound like getting along with the person in question would provide us with a lot of benefits. That said though, we might not actually be able to get along with him.

He might think us to be cheeky. Plus, he's a beastkin, so the very fact that he wants to meet with Fran seems kinda fishy given that she's a Black Catkin.

(But introduced by Erza.)

[True. I doubt Erza would introduce you to anyone that'd try to screw with you...]

"I know how you feel. You must be a bit anxious about it, mhmm?"

"Nn."

Yeah, in more than one way at that.

"Don't worry! I'll be right there with you. I'll make sure I take responsibility if he tries to take you for a fool."

What? Just how? God damn, Urushi's getting all teary eyed. It's okay boy, he's not that scary, it's okay.

"...Okay. Will meet."

"Thankies! I'll show you over to him then."

"Nn."

"Would you mind if we took a shortcut? I think it's one you should be able to take without any issues."

Erza jumped the moment he finished speaking.

Apparently his so called shortcut just involved running atop the building's roofs. I guess that made sense seeing as how this the city was built like a maze and all that, but was that really okay? Would we not get in trouble?

Er, actually, I guess there wouldn't really be any complaints, at least not to Erza's face anyways. Oh well, I guess it saves time, so whatever.

"Nn. No issues."

"Woof!"

"Knew it~!"



And so, we found ourselves in front of a fairly large house after 10 odd minutes.

It wasn't as big as the mansions nobles would typically have, but it was still fairly sizeable. Two fairly strong-looking beastkin were standing guard in front of the property's gate.

"Here?"

"Yup. This is Grandpa Aurel's house. Good day, guards."

"Good day, Erza. It has been quite a long time since we've last seen you. Please, do come on in."

"That I'll do. Oh, right, I've brought a little someone along with me, so don't worry about her."

"Sir."

Wow, Erza showing his face just flat out gets us past security and everything? Damn.

"I've done quite a few jobs for Gramps, so he's taken a liking to me and allowed me go in and out as I please."

"Spacious."

"Woof."

"He's a former B ranked adventurer and a successful businessman. He's even also

served at the King's side."

Holy crap, Aurel sounds like he's the spitting image of success. Yeah, he doesn't really sound like the type that'd get along with Fran. Alright, I should find us an excuse to get us the hell out of there just in case the mood turns sour.

Though, I guess he kinda already has his eyes on us already seeing as how he's calling us out right now.

Man though, the dude's garden is absolutely massive. We *still* hadn't even reached the actual house yet.

The garden was beautiful. It was filled with an assortment of flowers in full bloom and decorated with both fountains and statues. Erza taught us a bit about the flowers' names as we traversed our way through to the main building.

That said though, neither Fran nor Urushi really seemed to really care about what he was talking about at all.

"Gramps! I'm here!"

"Hello Erza."

"Hey Shalla, where's Aurel?"

"He's currently out relaxing on the terrace."

"Thankies. This way Fran."

"Nn."

Erza seemed to know the place pretty well. The maid recognized his face, and he'd managed to easily find his way over to his destination without having to stop and ask the maid for directions.

Our destination, the terrace, was on the building's second floor. It, like the garden, was incredibly vast and expansive. The mansion's size made it so that the terrace provided us a good view over the city in its entirety. Both Fran and Urushi also seemed rather impressed by the angle we had on Ulmutt.

“Wow.”

“Ruff.”

They both jogged right up to the terrace railing and began looking at the city while completing ignoring the mansion’s owner.

“Hahahaha. Looks like the view happens to be to your liking.”

Whew, thank god he wasn’t all anal about manners and stuff. He simply watched over Fran, Urushi, and the pair’s sparkling eyes with a bit of an amused look on his face.

“Nn. Amazing.”

“Woof.”

“That’s good to hear. I’m Wijaht Aurel, a White Dogkin. Mind telling me your name, little missy?”

“Nn. Black Catkin, Fran. This is Urushi.”

“Woof!”

“Thanks for accepting my invitation. Do have a seat.”

The White Dogkin was like Erza in the sense that he gave off an incredible sense of impact, albeit one of a completely different type; the man gave off the same sort of impression as a Mafia’s Don.

His back was straight, and his gait full of vitality despite the fact that he appeared rather old.

“You really don’t look like someone in their seventies no matter how I look at you. I really would like you to tell me your secret.”

“It isn’t really anything special. I simply kept setting goals for myself and moving forward. I just didn’t give my body any time to age.”

Thank god he isn't the type of person I was suspecting he might be.

"This tea is quite delicious, it's one of my favourites, so I do recommend you try some."

"Nn."

"The leaves come from the Continent of Chrome. Collecting tea leaves has in fact been the sole hobby that I've picked up in my older years."

"Garden?"

"I don't do the gardening myself. I just hire someone and have them do what they think works best. The garden would probably end up some sort of jungle if I was the one in charge of it."

Fran got down to business while enjoying the refreshments provided.

"Wanted to meet me? Why?"

"Hahaha, you sure are a hasty one. I honestly wasn't driven to do so by anything in particular. I just happened to feel like meeting you after hearing all the rumours that've been going around town lately."

"As I said earlier, he's basically the one in charge of all of Ulmutt's beastkin. He just so happened to be interested in you, Fran."

"In charge of the city's beastkin? That's an exaggeration. I just happen to know most of the people around because I was an adventurer for at least fifty years."

Is that really it? Does he really not like run an operation from the shadows or something? Okay, you know what, let's use the Principle of Falsehood and double check. I know Fran totally just warned me about overusing it, but this is one of this scenarios where I kinda have to! Right...?

"I took quite a bit of interest in how terrifyingly strong everybody said you were."

"So, what do you think? Isn't she cute? She really is just as strong as they say too."

"It seems that you've taken quite the liking to her. I can see why, it's been a while since

I've seen such a bold kid, so I too immediately took a liking to her. Also, I assume the fact that she's got your approval means that the rumours were true as well."

Apparently the part about him taking a liking to Fran was the truth.

"Still believe rumours even though I'm a Black Catkin?"

"What, did you think that being a Black Catkin innately made you weak? That's not true at all. I've met a fairly strong one when I was young, and right here in one of Ulmutt's dungeons at that."

Aurel spoke in a bit of a nostalgic tone.

"Really? That's not something I've ever been told about."

"That'd be because I've never mentioned it."

"Where is that person now?"

Fran questioned Aurel in a tone of voice much firmer than her usual one. I could see why though, this was our first time ever hearing about any other strong Black Catkin.

"That... isn't a question that I know the answer to."

"Then, what kind of person?"

"Well, it all happened a whole 53 years ago, so I've basically forgotten everything."

It seemed that he just lied to us... but why? Was it because he died in the dungeon or something?

Aurel's expression had gone dark. It didn't seem like he wanted to explore the topic in any more detail.

"I know most of this city's beastkin, so do tell me if you happen to run into any issues. I'll be sure to give you a hand."

The Principle of Falsehood informed me that he really meant what he said, that he'd help us out if need be. You know what, let's not try digging into that whole other Black

Catkin and whatnot. There was no point probing him about the topic, especially seeing as how we seemed to have just won his favour. No point going out of our way to lose it now.

“By the way, I happen to have a request for you. Would you mind taking it?”

“What kind?”

“I’d like you to deliver something to a place not too far from here. You should be able to get it done if you work at Erza’s pace.”

“Can’t just ask Erza?”

“I’d prefer if you took this request. How about it?”

“Okay.”

Fran replied to him immediately. I felt that this whole thing seemed a bit fishy, but Fran seems to think it’s okay, so , so I’ll just roll with it.

“Great. Thanks.”

“Nn.”

Aurel made a bit of a relieved smile. It seemed that he’d really wanted Fran to take his request.

“Alright then. I’d like you to take this to one of my acquaintances.”

“Pendant?”

Aurel handed Fran a plain looking pendant with a black stone embedded inside of it. It looked like the type you were supposed to wear around your neck.

It looked a really cheap item, the kind of thing you could find just about anywhere.

“That it is. Could you hand it over to the eastern dungeon’s Dungeon Master?”

“Dungeon Master?”

“Yeah. Make sure you hand it over personally, okay?”

“Nn. Got it.”

Hmm, this request’s got a bit of a mysterious air to it. I’m really looking forward to seeing what’ll come out of us doing it.

Chapter 158

The Mysterious Dungeon Master

(Sorry?)

[What for?]

(Accepted request without asking.)

[Oh, that? I'll admit I'm a bit worried about it, but I'm game so long as you are.]

(Nn.)

[Seems like you took a liking to that old man, eh?]

(That old man. Evolved.)

[Seriously?]

(Evolved White Dogkin. White Wolfkin.)

[Didn't he call himself a White Dogkin though?]

I could swear he introduced himself as "Wijaht Aurel, a White Dogkin."

(White Dogkin still White Dogkin after evolution. Just White Wolfkin variant.)

[Oh, so that's how that works? So you'll still technically be a Black Catkin even after you evolve?]

(Nn. Still some sort of Black Catkin.)

[Man, I'm honestly surprised you noticed though.]

(Can tell because also beastkin.)

[Is that how that works?]

(Nn. That's how that works.)

Is it cause their instincts, or maybe some sort of racial trait?

(Need to ask about evolution. That's why accepted request.)

[Ah, I get it. So that's why.]

"Nn."

"Hmmm? Did you say something?"

"Nothing."

"Really?"

We'd left Aurel's mansion and headed in the Adventurer's Guild's direction. We were still with Erza, and hence, naturally taking one of his shortcuts.

We hopped from roof to roof like a group of bunnies and surprised the crap out of anyone that happened to be in the middle of hanging their laundry.

Our purpose was simple. We were heading over to the Guild in order to formally file Aurel's request. If we didn't, it'd kind of end up as something along the lines of a personal favour as opposed to something that went through the guild and got processed.

Apparently, anything that involved delivering something to a Dungeon Master would automatically be qualified as a request of rank D or higher, hence, Erza had recommend that we record it so we could add it to our list of completed requests.

Moreover was the fact that anything that involved meeting a Dungeon Master was actually kind of a big deal. Hence, reporting in and notifying the Guildmaster ahead of time would be in our best interests.

"I've never actually been given the chance to meet the Dungeon Masters myself you

know?”

“Really?”

“Mhmm. The Dungeon Masters shut themselves in, so you might not find them even in the dungeon’s deepest depths. The Guild Master is more or less the only person capable of meeting them 100% of the time.”

Well then, it looks like this request of ours is an even bigger deal than I thought.

[Oh well. We kinda accepted it, so let’s put our heads together in order to figure out some way to actually see it through.]

I’ve also gotta think about Aurel’s true intentions as well. Why’d he go out of his way to ask this of Fran in particular?

I guess we should start by looking up some info about the Dungeon Master. The fact that it’s capable of negotiation means that we know for a fact that it’s a member of a race capable of speech, but honestly, that’s about the extent of our knowledge.



We managed to immediately get ourselves a moment of Dias’ time. Meeting the Guildmaster just like that wasn’t something that’d normally happen. Things only went as smoothly as they did because we happened to be in Erza’s company.

Apparently, Erza wanting to talk to the Guildmaster basically out prioritized everything else.

“Wow~ I’m surprised you’re here.”

“Well, I’m not always out and about. Did you need something?”

“Not exactly. Fran was the one that needed something.”

“Oh?”

“Nn.”

Fran quickly told Dias about the request Aurel had given her.

Rather, she started from the fact that the old dogkin had wanted to see her, and accounted everything between that and her receiving the request with particular emphasis on the refreshments she was treated with.

“Ah, so you met Aurel.”

“Acquainted?”

“Well, the city isn’t exactly what you’d call large, so yes, I have. Though, I’m rather surprised to see that he’s given you a request.”

“I can’t figure out Grandpa Aurel’s intentions myself. You got any clues, Guildmaster?”

“Hmm... So Aurel too, huh...?”

“Nn?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it. I’ll acknowledge his request, but with it, I’ll also give you a few warnings. First and foremost is the fact that you are absolutely forbidden from harming the Dungeon Master. Harming the Dungeon Master is a crime that’s deserving of something much worse than just capital punishment.”

“I know.”

He gave us one helluva harsh warning. It was possible for the Dungeon Master to destroy Ulmutt altogether if we pissed it off. That said though, we weren’t planning to attack it in the first place, so that at least shouldn’t be an issue.

“You should also keep in mind the fact that you may not actually be able to meet the Dungeon Master.”

“Know that too.”

“Good. “

“Nn.”

“Another thing is that she’s a bit hard to please. Try not to piss her off if you actually get to meet her.”

“She?”

The Dungeon Master’s a chick?

“Whoops, that’s something you should be looking into yourself, not something I’m supposed to be carelessly telling you.”

“Got it.”

We tried looking up a few things about the Eastern Dungeon Master a bit later on, but didn’t come up with anything at all.

Everything about the Dungeon Master seemed to have been classified or something. The only pieces of knowledge we ended up having were the fact that she was female and the fact that she was capable of speech.

I figured that we might be able to find ourselves some hints if we looked up stuff about the Western Dungeon Master instead, but that didn’t really end up producing any results either. Again, all we found out was that the Western Dungeon Master was also female.

A part of the lack of knowledge stemmed from the fact that very few had actually made it all the way through to the dungeon’s depths. Even fewer had actually managed to encounter the Dungeon Masters.

[Well, I guess going in blind is basically the only option we’ve got.]

I mean, we were planning to dive into the Eastern Dungeon’s depths anyways, so whatever, I guess.

Chapter 159

Traps Suck

[Alright, you ready to move on?]

“Nn.”

Today was our fifth day in Ulmutt. We’d already finished all our business in the dungeon’s simpler subsections, and hence, we’d started digging a bit deeper.

We were currently hunting magic beasts around where the 14th floor was located. We could’ve gone a bit deeper given the fact that we had to handle Aurel’s request and all that, but we decided to take it slow in order to avoid injury.

Speaking of which, Fran was currently in the middle of slowly disarming a trap.

The 14th floor was one of the dungeon’s lower floors, and the traps had been modified to match. They were much more complex than the ones we’d encountered earlier. They were made much nastier too.

What I mean by that is that the traps themselves were full of well, traps. For example, there was a trap composed of a bunch of wires. You’d normally assume that it’d activate if you stepped on something, and that you were supposed to disarm the trap by cutting its wires. However, that one was instead made so that it’d only trigger if you tried messing with it. Another example would be a trap that fired an arrow that activated another trap.

Some traps had also started causing teleportation or instant death upon activation. We also started hitting areas that’d seal off our ability to teleport or use Presence Detection — not that it mattered to me seeing as I had the Unsealable skill.

I mean, I knew that the Guildmaster’s managed to get a few negotiations done and all, but this was still technically a dungeon. It wasn’t some sort of training ground for adventurers. It was the real deal, a place in which one wrong step could lead to death.

“Nn... Done.”

[Really? Lemme see.]

Yup, looks like she disarmed that one perfectly.

Many of the Magic Beasts that thrived in the dungeon's lower levels had the Trap Detection, Trap Disarm, and Trap Creation skills. The magic beasts themselves weren't actually all that strong, but they could make for a deadly force when working in conjunction with the dungeon's traps. And that, to me, honestly seemed rather logical seeing as how the dungeon itself was pretty much crammed full of traps.

Absorbing said magic beasts' magic stones meant a fair increase in the respective skills' levels. Trap Detection had leveled to 7, Trap Disarm to 4, and Trap Creation to 3.

The dungeon's traps served to provide us with a bunch of practice too. The combination of the skill and practice had led Fran to become much more skillful in the art of disarming traps. The difference between her now and her when she tried disarming her first trap was as clear as the difference between night and day.

Two of the magics we'd obtained from Zerais' golems, Ice/Snow Magic and Lava Magic, turned out to be rather useful when it came to their applications in disarming traps.

Moonlight Magic, on the other hand, had been stuck sitting on the backburner. The only two spells we had at the moment were Moonphase and Night Vision. The former would provide us buffs at night. The latter would allow us to temporarily see in the dark. Neither was all that useful; we probably wouldn't be able to get any value out of Moonlight Magic until it leveled itself up a bit.

Ice/Snow Magic allowed us to freeze traps and hamper them from activating. In fact, a single activation of the magic would actually even flat out disarm explosion-type traps altogether.

Lava Magic was actually even more useful than Ice/Snow Magic. We could use it to weld a trap's subsection and just flat out stop it from activating.

Both Magics had quite the potential for practical use even outside of battle-type situations.

That said though, Fran was still far from being able to disarm every single trap every single time.

“Oops.”

[Short Jump!]

“Whimper!”

Holy crap that was close. We were almost hit by a series of super high speed bullets made of water despite the fact that we’d teleported away. The area of effect was insane. We probably would’ve gotten seriously injured had we not escaped. The bullets were powerful enough to just flat out kill you should they hit your head or some other vital.

“Sorry.”

[Looks like you’re still a bit shy of being able to disarm the traps here perfectly.]

“Nn.”

“Woof.”

Oh well, can’t really be helped. That trap was the kind that wouldn’t let you go any further unless you did something about it.

Aurel’s request aside, we’d set out to do four other things.

The first was to level up. The second was to finish all the quests required for us to rank up. The third was to git gud and learn how to use all our current skills. The fourth and final was to get our hands on a skill that’d prevent us from being susceptible to skills that’d mess with our minds.

To be more specific, we were looking for a skill that’d prevent us from being affected by stuff like Coerced Camaraderie and Induced Thought.

Skills like those two only guided our thoughts, and didn’t provide us with any obvious indicators like status conditions, hence why they were especially troublesome to deal with.

We ultimately managed to discover that there actually was a monster with the skill we were looking for here in Ulmutt's eastern dungeon, but it was one that only resided in the dungeon's deepest depths.

Dias and Solas both claimed that their skills simply didn't work on said monster.

Hence, we were currently giving ourselves a bit of practice while advancing towards our goal: the area at and beyond the dungeon's 18th floor. Getting there would allow us to finish Aurel's request too. It was a veritable two birds one stone type situation.

Our pace wasn't all that bad despite us actively looking for practice. We'd managed to make our way down to the dungeon's 14th floor after just 2 days worth of adventuring.

Dimensional Storage made it so that we didn't really have to worry too much about meals, baths, or bedding. More importantly, both Fran and Urushi still looked fairly motivated. In fact, the stronger enemies and more difficult traps were only getting the two even more pumped up.

Several large magic beasts had been standing in the 14th floor's first notable room.

"Growlllll."

"Master. High Ogres."

[I guess that means this room won't have any traps in it then.]

High Ogres, unlike the dungeon's other monsters, lacked the ability to deal with traps. None were placed in the rooms in which they were placed in order to avoid the possibility of them killing themselves.

They compensated for that weakness through pure power. They generally considered strong enough to give a D ranked adventurers a fairly hard time.

We could just flat out take them head on though, so to us, their spawn zones were more or less safe because they lacked traps.

[Here we go!]

“Nn.”

“Grrrrrrrr!”

Our strategy was to wipe them all out in one go with a surprise attack. Fighting them for an extended amount of time was a bad idea, seeing as how other magic beasts could come back them up.

Urushi immediately leapt towards one of the high ogres and readied himself to bite it.

“Growl!”

A barrage of arrows flew straight towards us the moment he tried to take action.

[Holy shit! Air Shield!]

“Ruff?”

I repelled the projectiles with a spell as Urushi panicked and dove straight back into the shadows.

Apparently the room actually did have traps inside of it. I looked towards the high ogres only to find that the arrows had simply bounced off their skin.

Ahhh, I see. Traps like this can work with them because they can’t damage the High Ogres at all. That said, they could prove rather lethal if they hit us.

Man, these traps just keep getting nastier.

[Alright, you know what, let’s just quickly wipe them out. Inferno Burst!]

“Grooowl!”

The flame spell I used turned one of the High Ogres into a lump of coal as Urushi impaled another with a spear constructed of pure darkness.

[Well, so much for High Ogre zones being safe zones...]

“Bring it on.”

Well, I guess at least Fran's motivated, so there's that.

[Let's try being extra careful just in case. It looks like the traps are going to be getting even nastier from here on out.]

"Nn."

[You be careful too, Urushi. We'll need to avoid stuff like what just happened.]

"Whimper..."

We discovered a type of trap we'd never seen before shortly after concluding that we'd do best to be a bit more prudent.

"Weird thread here."

[Good job catching that. I only barely noticed it myself.]

"Trap?"

The thread Fran and I saw looked identical to the infrared sensors you'd normally see in movies and whatnot. The fact that it was visible meant that it was likely linked to some sort of magic, but I couldn't tell what would come out of popping it.

"Want to try activating?"

[Sounds like a plan. It'd be a good idea for us to know what happens when you pop it. You know, just for future reference.]

We triggered the trap with one of my doppelgangers after moving a fair ways back.

I heard a bit of an odd rumbling sound the moment my doppelganger stepped into one of the infrared-like lines.

"Master. Walls moving."

[What?]

It was exactly as Fran described. The walls at the passage's rear slid along the floor and rearranged themselves. The former straight passageway now ended in a forced right turn.

I see, I see. The trap was on a rather large scale, and honestly, I had no idea how we were supposed to go about disarming. Just looking at it didn't really provide us many clues; we more or less had no choice but to just give it a shot.

The moment I thought that was the moment the walls started to move again.

"Master?"

[Don't look at me. My Doppelganger's already gone. Was it maybe cause of Urushi?]

"Woof woof!"

Urushi frantically shook his head. I guess that means it wasn't him either. So... who triggered it then? I mean, someone had to, the walls were moving.

My question was answered as the left wall vanished and opened up a passage that revealed a single High Ogre.

[Oh! I get it now! It was the High Ogre that popped the trap!]

It seemed that these traps were the kind that'd trigger regardless of how careful we were. That is, the High Ogres would pretty much just keep setting them off.

Huh, this looks pretty bad. You wouldn't be able to use a map here even if you had one. The traps would move around, so you'd never really be able to know what was coming at you next.

"Graaahhhhh!"

The ogre caught sight of us as we were thinking about the dungeon's traps.

[Alright, you know what, let's just get rid of that first, and then think.]

Man, this dungeon sure is one hell of a pain in the ass to deal with.

Chapter 160

The 18th Floor

[Looks like we're finally here.]

"Nn."

"Woof."

We finally reached the the dungeon's 18th floor, the place that'd let us complete one of our overarching objectives.

The floors that extended beyond the 14th had given us one hell of an adventure. The number of magic beasts that attacked us multiplied exponentially, and we ended up activating more than 30 different traps as we traversed our way through the dungeon.

The most troublesome Magic Beasts we ran into were vapor-like creature whose species were simply known as "MIST." They could disperse their bodies and make themselves not only invulnerable to physical attacks, but also entirely undetectable to any that relied on Presence Detection. They even had the ability to activate traps if they chose to condense their bodies down to a smaller size. That in particular was something the MISTs did to us like n times. God, they were annoying as all hell.

Disposing of the MISTs was, in and of itself, rather easy. All we had to do was blast a few AOE spells every time we entered a new area. They kinda couldn't just stay in hiding if we flooded the entire area with our attacks. They'd more or less get destroyed immediately after two or three repetitions as their specs made it so that they weren't really suited to battle.

In some cases, us firing off AOE's like crazy also allowed us to set off a few traps in advance and save ourselves from having to deal with them.

The only issue with us doing that was that we more or less deprived Fran of a fair portion of her practice. That said though, we were already pretty deep in the dungeon, so I figured it was about time for us to focus on making sure she stayed unhurt instead.

Besides, I figured that it was a much better idea for us to focus our efforts on finding the magic beast that'd give us the skill we wanted anyways.

Specifically, we were looking for Dirty Wisps. They were rare apparitions that looked like black balls of light.

We walked around the 18th floor for quite some time, but we weren't able to find so much as a single one.

All our efforts ended up doing nothing but providing us exp and magic stones. Fran had leveled all the way up to 43, and I was on the verge of getting myself a rank up as well. Fran was pretty damn close to her level cap, and I was rather curious as to what would happen when she reached it. In fact, I was so curious that I even considered just having her grind out the last little bit on multiple occasions, but I ultimately ended up deciding against it...

[Oh well, I guess it can't be helped. Dirty Wisps are elusive. If we can't find them, we can't find them. Let's move on.]

"Nn."

"Woof?"

[What's wrong, boy?]

"Growl!"

Urushi suddenly growled and used Dark Magic; he shot a jet black spear straight towards one of the dungeon's walls.

"Pigiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

[Dude, that's gross.]

A large, purple and orange caterpillar suddenly seemed to phase into existence. It wriggled about as it clung to the dungeon's wall and barged a strange, black liquid. A similar, putrid smelling substance spilled from the hole Urushi had opened up in the caterpillar's gut.

[Wait a sec, did I seriously not notice that thing till it got *that* close to us? Did you catch it at all, Fran?]

“Also missed.”

“Growl!”

Apparently the thing was called a Mimic Venom Crawler. It seemed to be the type of creature that’d wait for its prey to come to it. This was further evidenced by its skills, as it had Mimicry, Presence Isolation, and Muffled Action. As per its name, the Mimic Venom Crawler’s offenses mostly stemmed from abilities related to poison. That is, it had Poison Fang, Poison Magic, and Poison Spray.

It seemed that Urushi happened to notice it because he’d detected its scent.

The intel we gathered before venturing into the dungeon suggested that Mimic Venom Crawlers were the dungeon’s leading cause of casualties, and that adventurers should be as wary of them as possible. In fact, they were even thought of as more of a threat than High Ogres.

Now that we’ve seen them in the flesh, I pretty much came to the same conclusion. They were not only extremely stealthy but also had the ability to fell a man in a single blow by poisoning him. The only ones that could possibly deal with them were those that were highly skilled in detection, and hence, they seemed like they could cause an exorbitant amount of trouble even for adventurers of an intermediate skill level.

On the other hand, the materials you could get from subjugating Mimic Venom Crawlers made hunting them down well worth it. They were extremely useful, and four of the fetch quests we were assigned actually involved grabbing stuff from their corpses. Specifically, we needed their carapaces, their poison sacs, their venomous fangs, and their meat.

I couldn’t really see anyone wanting to eat one of these things, but they were actually considered quite the delicacy. They were said to be like pufferfish in the sense that they were delicious, but could screw you over pretty hard if you didn’t detoxify them properly.

Their magic stones didn’t really give that many points, but absorbing them gave me

opportunities to level up Presence Isolation and Poison Magic, so again, hunting them was hella worth.

Alright Urushi! It's all you, go go go!

"Urushi. Do your best."

"Woof?"

Do nose things!



We spent the next two hours having Urushi, who'd more or less become a professional caterpillar hunter, lead us around.

Our little adventure had taken us all the way to the stairs that led down to the dungeon's 19th floor.

We had managed to take down a whole 10 of them. Hnnng.

"Master. What now?"

[Well, I mean, we're already here, so we might as well just move on. Dirty Wisps are supposed to spawn on every floor after the 17th, and we've already got all the caterpillar corpses we'll need, so there's not really any reason for us to go out of our way just to sit around on the 18th floor.]

"Nn. Got it."

And so, we began descending the staircase.

"Woof?"

[What's wrong boy?]

"Woof woof!"

Urushi began barking at something. He seemed to be looking towards the ground.

I honestly couldn't tell what he was barking at. To me, it looked like he was just making a fuss about the stones paved below us. Only after activating all my detection based skills did I finally manage to notice that there actually was something there.

“Growllll!”

Urushi shot a jet black spear straight towards the floor. Man, what's with this deja vu? I swear this literally just happened.

“Aaaaaaahhhhh!!!”

The thing that Urushi had attacked screamed and almost seemed to ooze out of the floor in response to his strike. The form it took was like that of an orb giving off a dark light. Its identity was none other than that of the Dirty Wisp that we'd been looking for.

General Information

Race: Dirty Wisp. (Spirit/Magic Beast)

Level: 11

HP: 28

MP: 66

STR: 11

VIT: 17

AGI: 86

INT: 101

MGC: 151

DEX: 30

Skills

Presence Isolation: Lv 4

Thought Isolation: Lv 3

Resistance to Mental Abnormalities: Lv 3

Magic Absorption: Lv 3

Dark Magic: Lv 6

Dark Resistance: Lv 2

It seemed like the Dirty Wisp had used Dark Magic in order to hide itself in the shadows. Urushi had probably only noticed it because he himself was well versed in Dark Magic.

Man, I swear Urushi's like perfect for this dungeon. I sure am glad he's with us. Shit would've been terrifying without him; Fran definitely wouldn't have been able to get this far unscathed.

[Good job Urushi! I'll treat you to something nice later.]

"Woof!"

[How's some super spicy curry sound?]

"Woof woof!"

"Mmph. Will also do best."

Fran took a stance; it seemed that hearing about Urushi's reward had gotten her all fired up.

[Make sure you don't let that Dirty Wisp get away.]

"Nn!"

The Thought Isolation skill that it had was exactly what we were after. No way in hell we're leaving without it!

[Urushi, make sure it doesn't teleport away!]

"Woof!"

Chapter 161

The Night Fran Hit Level 44

“Hah!”

“Aaahh!”

Fran swung me straight at the Dirty Wisp, but my blade ended up passing through its body.

It looked like it used Dark Magic in order to defend itself. Specifically, it used a spell that made it momentarily immune to physical attacks.

“Fire Javelin!”

“Aaaahhh!”

[Tsk. Damn this thing’s fast.]

The Dirty Wisp had managed to create a Dark Shield and fend off Fran’s attack. It was not only swift as a coursing river, but also able to cast its spells at an extraordinary speed.

[Fire Arrow.]

[Fire Arrow.]

[Fire Arrow.]

I adapted to the Dirty Wisp’s traits and fired off a larger number of spells in order to make sure it wouldn’t be able to defend itself. I figured that the barrage I shot at it would finally allow us to take it down, but apparently I was in the wrong.

“Aahh!”

[It disappeared...? Wait, no! The damn thing teleported!]

The Dirty Wisp appeared about 3 meters away from its prior location.

It didn't seem like it was capable of teleporting long distances, but still, it was a pain in the ass to deal with. We honestly probably could just spam at it till it died if we wanted, but we might end up breaking its magic stone if we used anything with too much power behind it. Destroying the thing we were after would kinda defeat the whole purpose of us hunting the thing down in the first place.

The issue we were plagued with was one that stemmed from the fact that the Dirty Wisp was actually quite weak. Stronger magic beasts would have harder magic stones, and thus, we could hit them harder without having to worry about smashing their cores to bits.

In that case, the best thing for us to do would be...

[Let's focus on speed and hit it before it can react.]

"Nn."

[Urushi!]

"Woof! Growl!"

[Fire Arrow!]

"Aaahhh!"

The Dirty Wisp dove into the shadows in order to escape our attacks, and, in doing so, danced right to our tune.

Despite being quick as hell, the Dirty Wisp didn't have access to Chant Shortening, so it wasn't capable of teleporting in quick succession. In other words, all we needed to do was hit it the moment after it teleported.

We made use of our detection skills in order to predict where it'd teleport to, a feat only made possible through the experiences we gained throughout our exploration of Ulmutt's eastern dungeon.

“Ha!”

Fran’s right hand flashed as she wreathed me in flame and cleaved straight through the Dirty Wisp.

[Nice!]

“Nn!”

[Alright, let’s keep this up and have ourselves a wisp hunt!]

“Woof!”



And so, three hours flew right by.

[Fran, Urushi, dinner’s ready.]

“Nn!”

“Woof!”

We set up camp in one of the 19th floor’s corners.

The combination of the tent we looted off Solas and the barriers Urushi and I put up practically made our little campsite the dungeon’s safest spot.

We accomplished a lot today. We hunted ourselves some Dirty Wisps, got the skill we wanted, and even grinded Fran all the way up to level 44.

Tomorrow, we would finally reach reach the dungeon’s 20th floor and maybe even have Fran hit her max level.

That was all fine and dandy in and of itself, but there was something I had to tell her before she capped.

[Hey, Fran. You got a bit?]

“Nn?”

[You’re on the verge of hitting level 45.]

“Nn.”

[Appraisal’s telling me that level 45 is also your max.]

“I know.”

[So uh... yeah...]

It was a bit hard for me to actually say it, but still, it was better to disappoint her now than later.

Hence, I steeled myself and decided to just be honest.

[I don’t actually think hitting the level cap will let you evolve.]

It was just a prediction, but one I felt I simply had to say to her nonetheless.

I knew that the Black Cat Tribe was weak, but that didn’t necessarily mean that all of its members were just flat out incapable of combat. She can’t have been the only one to have ever hit level 45.

In other words, Black Catkin probably needed to do more than just hit the level cap if they wanted to evolve.

“Nn.”

Fran simply responded to the concern I voiced by nodding. She didn’t seem particularly upset.

“Same as other beastkin. Satisfied conditions required for evolution. Example, fox tribes’ conditions well known.”

High level foxkin were only able to evolve if they happened to possess Fox Fire, one of the tribe’s inherent skills. Black Catkin also likely had some sort of restriction that

would gate from evolution unless they managed to fulfill it.

“Don’t know details, but heard White Wolf also needs special condition.”

[Really?]

“That’s why want to talk with Gramps. Might be able to get hints.”

[So I’m guessing that’s why you accepted his request?]

“Nn.”

I really should’ve realized that Fran was thinking more about her evolution than I was. It’d been her goal this whole time.

[Well, alright. All’s well so long as you’re aware.]

“No issues.”

Chapter 162

The Boss Room

“At dungeon’s deepest part?”

[I think so. The boss should be on the other side of these doors.]

A day had passed since Fran and I discussed the terms of her evolution. And since then, we’d finally reached the dungeon’s 20th floor, its deepest depths.

In front of us stood a single door. Its intimidating frame stood at a height of almost ten meters. It had a property that made it deflect magical energies, so we couldn’t really discern as to what was in the room it led to.

We could feel a bit of bloodthirst leak through the door, but, that alone wasn’t enough for us to discern the extent of the boss’ strength. All it told us was that the boss was our foe.

“Dungeon Master inside?”

[Probably. My guess is that the answer is yes, but I don’t really have anything to back it up.]

“I see.”

[The info we have on the boss is all over the place, so I honestly can’t even make a good guess as to what we’ll encounter.]

The eastern dungeon was the type that didn’t have a set boss. Apparently, there were about 15 different bosses. The one that ended up appearing would typically be the one that was best suited to combat the challenging party.

Weaker parties would sometimes be pitted against E ranked bosses, monsters even weaker than the High Ogres that one could encounter on the way to the boss room. More powerful parties would sometimes be faced by boss monsters labeled as C

ranked threats. In other words, the bosses could be so powerful that they ended up transcending the dungeon's rank.

Mages have studied the dungeon and come up with a theory to describe the phenomenon. Said theory states that the precise boss that'd spawn was actually based off of the actions the party took as they made their way through the dungeon.

We did gather ourselves a bit of info on the stronger bosses that the dungeon was known to spawn, just in case.

The number of known C ranked possibilities totaled to 3. There was the Tyrant Saber Toothed Tiger that I'd fought in the past, the Smog Hydra, a six headed monster whose smoke would inflict all sorts of different status conditions, and the Specter Lord, a creature that'd summon and make use of the spirits of the dead.

Erza had fought both of the first two species. Amanda had stated that she fought the last back when she herself was a C ranker. In other words, both cases served to evidence that stronger individuals would end up facing off against stronger enemies.

Dias, on the other hand, seemed to be completely exempted from all combat. His face more or less served as a pass that'd let him get through the dungeon without having to face off against a boss.

I'm pretty curious as to the type of boss we'll end up having to face off against. We could take it easy if the boss turned out to be rather weak or something, but I'd end up feeling a bit miffed cause that'd mean that we were thought to be weak. That said, I'd really prefer if we weren't forced to face off against something that was *too* powerful.

Honestly, I was hoping for a D ranked spawn. That sounded like it'd be the most ideal.

That said though, there wasn't actually any issue in having a more powerful enemy spawn. Ulmutt's Eastern dungeon was unique in the sense that its boss room didn't lock you in.

You could make an escape so long as the boss didn't kill you instantly. Apparently that was one of the terms of the contract Dias and the Dungeon Master had signed.

We'd even be able to just use Dimension Jump to teleport out so long as there weren't

any magic related restrictions in place too.

I planned to immediately test whether or not we actually could teleport out of the boss room. If so, I figured that we could totally just fight whatever was thrown at us regardless of how powerful it is, cause we'd at least have ourselves a life line.

[Alright, let's do this.]

"Nn!"

"Woof!"

And so, Fran gave the door a push.

It groaned as it opened and revealed to us the boss room's contents.

"Ball?"

[Looks like one.]

"Woof?"

The thing that awaited us was exactly what Fran had described. It was... some sort of ball. Its shape was a bit irregular, so you couldn't really say that it was a perfect sphere or whatever, but it definitely was some sort of ball nonetheless.

Hmm... how do I put this? The boss looked like it was made out of a bunch of huge turtle shells stitched together to form a ball. It actually kind of resembled a gigantic, black pineapple of sorts. Its hard exterior looked to be about 20 meters in diameter.

I honestly couldn't tell what the hell it was based purely on how it looked, but it seemed pretty strong.

General Information

Species: Disaster Pill Bug (Insect-type Magic Beast)

Level: 45

HP: 522

MP: 521

STR: 335
VIT: 339
AGI: 412
INT: 101
MGC: 298
DEX: 151

Skills

Air Jump: Lv 5
Harden: Lv 8
Presence Detection: Lv 5
Regeneration: Lv 8
Vibration Strike: Lv 7
Resistance to Mental Abnormalities: Lv 8
Resistance to Abnormal Status Conditions: Lv 8
Rush: Lv 9
Magic Resist: Lv 7
Magic Detection: Lv 5
Magic Emission: Lv 7
Reinforced Carapace
Lightweight Carapace
Hardened Carapace
Reinforced Regeneration
Automatic Mana Regeneration
Weight Boost

Greater Vitality Increase

Description: A pill bug that's undergone an abnormal evolution. It's body is covered in a hard shell. Its wings do not allow flight despite it being an insect-type magic beast. Its main method of attack is to charge at its target whilst relying on the weight of its massive body. It can use Magic Emission to suddenly change directions. It is very difficult to inflict damage upon. It is classified as a C ranked threat despite being roughly as powerful as a B ranked threat in combat.

Magic Stone Location: Heart (Center of Body).

The boss was a top tier C ranked threat, a foe of unquestionable strength.

I honestly wasn't really sure as to whether or not we'd actually be able to damage the damned thing. It had a whole tonne of resistances and could even regenerate. Luckily, it wasn't capable of casting any spells, but honestly, its inability to do so was more or less negligible given how powerful its charge could be.

[Fran! Urushi! Let's go all out!]

We started off with a preemptive strike. That is, all three of us fired off a spell.

[Inferno Burst!]

"Tornado Lance!"

"Grooowl!"

The pillbug moved at a near unbelievable speed and dodged all three spells in a heartbeat by rolling away.

Even just watching the action filled me with a sense of revulsion. There was no start up or anything like it. The pillbug simply went from being stationary to suddenly moving around at a super high speed. My guess was that it'd used its ability to emit Magical Energy.

This battle was one that was impossible for us to win lest we threw away the presumption that heavy things with massive frames were also slow and clunky.

"Enemy attacking."

[Dodge it!]

The Magic Beast rolled in our direction as it used its Rush skill. This must be how Indi*na Jones felt when whenever he met himself a giant rock. The large black ball gave off an incredible sense of pressure.

"Kuh!"

[Are you okay, Fran!?!]

“Nn... Just a scratch.”

[The fact that it's damaging you just by giving you a little bit of a scratch is one hell of a problem.]

Its high speed attacks were already capable of causing quite a bit of damage on their own. The fact that it had access to Vibration Strike only served to make it even more deadly. You could end up taking a lot of damage just from having it scrape you.

More important was the fact that it had magic resistance. We couldn't damage it from afar by bombarding it with spells.

[What a pain in the ass!]

“But first powerful enemy in long time.”

[What do you mean?]

“Given chance to become even stronger.”

God damn battle maniac!

But, you know what? I guess that's in part what makes her so reliable.

Chapter 163

Disaster Pill Bug

A large black ball, the Disaster Pill Bug, rapidly closed in on us.

Its massive body made its attacks incredibly powerful, but that wasn't all — the bug was extremely mobile. The combination of these two factors made it ridiculously difficult to deal with.

We'd already experienced the extent of this combination head on several times. We barely managed to dodge the bug's attacks only to have it suddenly turn on the spot and fly in our direction on several occasions. We would've long been squashed if not for our ability to teleport.

One couldn't even get away from the damn thing by taking to the air, as its Air Jump skill allowed it to chase its prey in all 3 dimensions.

Even more troublesome was the hardness of its shell. Poking at it with anything other than an all out attack would only leave it with a scratch. That would be fine and dandy and allow us to accumulate damage and all, if not for the fact that the insect could regenerate. Its defenses were as solid as Rynford's.

And if you thought that was all, then boy, you've got a whole 'nother thing coming. The Disaster Pill Bug was capable of throwing a counter with Vibration Strike the moment we tried to attack it. Its detection skills seemed to make it capable of figuring exactly when we were going to strike each and every single time.

It didn't seem like we were going to beat the bug by kiting it and poking at it sporadically. In fact, we were racking up more damage than it was.

But that honestly just made things a lot simpler.

"Nn. Same as usual."

We just had to do as we always did and finish it off with a single powerful blow.

“Master.”

[Roger.]

Transform was one of the skills I’d used the most in our exploration of Ulmutt’s Eastern Dungeon; I’d practiced it hundreds upon hundreds of times. The Katana form was one of the forms I’d assumed the most, and hence, I was now able to take it in an instant. I’d even become capable of maintaining it for an hour with relative ease.

“Master. Going.”

[Alright! Urushi, lure the boss real quick.]

“Ruff!”

We hid our presences as Urushi provoked the pill bug and got its attention.

The large black ball immediately turned in Urushi’s direction the moment he threw a spell at it. The wolf was in his larger form, but he still looked puny next to the giant pill bug regardless.

“Grooowl!”

Urushi was not only more agile than Fran, but also capable of diving into the shadows if need be, so I was pretty sure that he wouldn’t have any issues if all he needed to do was dodge the pill bug’s attacks. His efficacy as bait was furthered by the fact that his magical strikes allowed him to ensure that the enemy stayed focused on him.

We finished all necessary preparations in a mere few moments.

That said, there wasn’t actually enough space for us to use the thing we used on Rynford. The ceiling was too low; we couldn’t fall far enough to build up all the kinetic energy we needed to make the technique work. I wasn’t too sure how things would end up going, so I didn’t dare pour every last bit of magical energy I had into my blade.

That said, we did have a plan. None of the dodging we did was aimless. We hadn’t just been running away.

Fran waited for the exact moment the pill bug struck a wall and immediately went on the offensive right as it lost all momentum.

She used a combination of my threads and Air Compression to fire herself off in the bug's direction. That, of course, wasn't all. She threw both wind and fire magic into the mix to accelerate herself even further. She activated weight manipulation and cloaked my blade in the elements twice over as she drew me from a sheath of compressed air. Every last bit of destructive force she outputted was concentrated on the very tip of my blade.

"Haaah!"

[Nice!]

I'd been pretty sure of our victory, but it looked like I'd been underestimating the Disaster Pill Bug. It was a C ranked threat. C ranked threats were more than just one trick ponies. The bug was capable of much more than mere offense.

The pill bug suddenly used magic emission and caused its body to begin rotating in the slash's direction, an action that negated a fair portion of the damage that would have otherwise been inflicted.

As a result, her slash only managed to leave a large gash in the magic beast's shell; its internals remained unharmed.

[Damn!]

"Strong as expected."

[But we've at least made enough progress.]

I mean, it would've been nice if we were able to finish him in just one hit, but not doing so was just fine as well. We'd already planned ahead, just in case.

We focused our attentions on the wound that we'd just opened.

[Looks like it worked just the way we thought it would.]

"Nn. Can't regenerate when frozen."

Our element of choice hadn't been the combination of the usual fire and lighting that we'd always loved to use. It'd instead been ice/snow.

The experiments we conducted regarding elemental weaknesses had led us to come to realize that wounds inflicted through ice/snow magic would regenerate at an abnormally slow rate.

We'd created the perfect weakness. All we needed to do now was launch an attack into the crack we made in its shell and we'd be golden. In other words, we secured ourselves a means of attacking the bug's internals.

"Once more."

[Let's finish it off!]

"Woof!"

The only problem was that the pill bug would likely rotate in much the same manner as it had earlier. It'd be pretty hard for Fran to attack the exact spot she was aiming for.

[Alright, here's the plan. We'll let Urushi attack immediately after he finishes one of those spins. It's gotta take a good amount of force for him to spin like that, and he probably uses a tonne of magical energy every time, so he probably can't do it in rapid succession.]

"Nn. Urushi, leave to you."

"Woof!"

We kicked ourselves into gear so that we could bring the damned thing down. Urushi started spamming magic at it in order to draw its attention while Fran and I quietly awaited an opening.

It didn't take long for opportunity to knock.

The pill bug emitted a bunch of magical energy in order to hunt down Urushi, but missed and crashed into yet another wall.

Fran immediately leapt at the pillbug, whose open wound just so happened to be facing us. Everything was perfect. All we needed to do was hit the damned thing one more time.

[Let's do this!]

“Haaaah!”

We launched a second attack with everything we had behind it —

— Only to realize that we hadn't grasped the full extent of the pill bug's strength.

I'd thought that the tides of battle were in our favour and that victory would soon be in our grasp. In fact, I hadn't just thought it. I'd been convinced of it by none other than the Disaster Pill Bug itself.

Shit! How the hell!? I lost to a mere bug in a battle of wits!?

Something burst out from within the bug's wound the moment Fran was about to slash it.

It lured us in and made sure to attack from a range at which we would be unable to avoid its strike. That said, it seemed that it'd been pushing itself, as its actions had caused its MP to plummet.

“Nraaah!”

[Shittt!]

The insect compressed its magical energy and launched a projectile from within its broken carapace.

Our eyes were instantly filled with naught but a single flash of white.

Chapter 164

Level 45 And Self Evolution Rank 12

The burst of magical energy that'd come from within the pill bug's carapace shattered it and caused its fragments to fly towards us at an incredible speed. The resulting attack that came at us was so fast and destructive that it was almost like that of a shotgun.

I hadn't realized that the pill bug could use its Magical Emission skill in such rapid succession. It hadn't done anything like this before despite having crashed into walls. In other words, the damned insect had been holding its trump card in reserve.

We'd been under the effects of Chronos Clock. As a result, everything was moving in slow motion, but the insect's projectile continued to move at a ridiculously high speed regardless. With the attack's absurd speed came an incredible amount of power. Even a single fragment of the insect's shell could probably inflict onto Fran a serious chunk of damage.

Shit. I can't deploy my full powered barriers in time.

I'd already created a set of magical and physical barriers purely out of reflex, but neither had been full forced, and as a result, the pill bug's attack had shattered them both with ease. The moment I realized that was the moment I played another one of the cards I had on hand. One of our contingencies was for me to use my Telekinetic Catapult. To that end, I'd been saving up a bunch of telekinetic energy. I immediately unleashed every single last bit of in order to form a defensive wall so I could protect Fran. However, there was a problem. I had to cover a rather large area, so I wasn't able to exert all that much force. I was only capable of weakening the projectiles that came at us. Stopping them altogether was simply not an option.

Still, I at least had to try.

Fran had already pushed herself to the limit. She'd already started using several skills and spells in conjunction. Moreover was the fact that she'd also already initiated a full force charge in the pill bug's direction — there was no way for her to suddenly avoid

the bug's counter. She simply didn't have the liberty to do so.

"Kuh!"

[Short Ju-]

I immediately tried teleporting us out the moment I heard Fran groan.

We needed to make a bit of distance between us and the pill bug if we wanted to be able to escape it.

(Don't!)

But Fran stopped me from actually casting the spell. Unlike me, she had yet to give up on the assault. She put the left half of her body forward in order to shield her dominant hand from harm. The black catgirl supported efforts further by cancelling some of her offensive skills in order to erect a barrier, one that would assist her in her charge. She even made use of the Air Jump skill in order to make sure she wouldn't get blown away.

Fran firmly held her ground, but as one could expect, she was unable to remain unscathed. The combination of Fran's barrier and my telekinesis were able to drastically reduce the attack's power, but each of the projectiles still held enough force to rend Fran's flesh; countless shell fragments embedded themselves inside of her.

The numerous wounds that'd been torn into her body were painful enough to make even the most mature adults scream in pain, but she managed to endure the bug's last stand by gritting her teeth and grinding down on them.

"Burniaaaaaa!"

Fran used a flame spell to hit the gas yet again as she thrust me at the pill bug with all her might. The attack the magic beast fired off had rid it of its hard exterior and rendered it defenseless. Hence, my blade sank into its exposed body as easily as a hot knife would a block of butter.

I felt not the sensation of a hard exoskeleton, but instead the softness of tearing flesh as my body was driven inside of the insect's.

"Haah... Guh..."

Fran had managed to embed me within the pill bug's, but she'd lost a lot of her own strength and stamina in the process. She seemed completely exhausted and on the verge of going limp.

[Come on Fran. Hang in there, you've almost got it!]

"Will finish now..."

[Do it!]

Shit. I'm not sure she'll be able to fight much longer. It'd be best for me to try finishing the damned thing off here and now.

I already knew exactly what to do. A clear image of my intentions resonated within my mind as I solidified them.

I focused all my magical energies into my blade and activated Vibration Fang and Wind Elemental Blade simultaneously. I then directed my attention towards the use of transformation and manipulated my body in much the same way the System Announcer had done before me. I imitated the actions she took when she'd used thin, sharp strands of my blade to absorb the numerous Skeletons' magic stones. That is, I warped my body whilst retaining the image of having thin threads extend from my tip.

A hundred steel fibres parted from my body and began shredding the pill bug from inside out. I backed the effort further by throwing the Thread Manipulation skill into the mix. I forcibly controlled every last part of my body in order to have its strands run rampant within the pill bug's figure.

I wasn't able to manipulate myself nearly as skillfully as the System Announcer had, but that was honestly something I'd already been expecting.

"Nn!"

Fran pitched in as well and used Elemental Blade to cloak my body in lightning.

"Gigiii... Giiiiiiii!!"

Fran's actions functioned as a finishing blow; her spell caused the pill bug to let out

one last cry as it lost its life. The strength drained from its limbs. Its body's functions slowed to a stop.

〈Self Evolution has activated. You have gained 60 self-evolution points.〉

I ranked up. That was nice and all, but I had priorities. What mattered right now was Fran. I made use of my telekinetic abilities and gently laid her down on the boss room's floor.

[Greater Heal!]

“Uu...”

[Fran, are you alright?]

“Master...”

Whew, looked like I managed to heal her in time. Most of her larger wounds had closed up. She was still alive and kicking.

“Won...?”

[That we did.]

Fran pushed herself off the ground with both arms in response to my words.

“First victory in long time.”

[What do you mean?]

“First time in long time facing strong enemy head on and winning.”

Hearing Fran say that made me think about all the strong foes we had faced in the past.

The demon we fought hadn't been able to show its true potential, and we'd only won because it'd basically half screwed itself.

Amanda always completely rekt us every time we sparred her.

The Lich totally destroyed us. We probably would've died if not for the System Announcer.

Fran hadn't been able to engage in direct combat with the Midgard Wurm. Plus, we didn't end up actually taking that one down either.

We only won against Rynford because of the people that'd helped us beat him back. We probably would've lost otherwise.

There was only a single instance in which we went head on against anything that was considered a C level threat or higher and won, and that was when we fought the Legendary Skeleton.

〈Fran has reached level 45.〉

“Nn!”

[Nice! You finally did it!]

General Information

Name: Fran

Age: 12

Race: Beastkin (Black Cat Tribe)

Job: Magic Warrior

State: Bound to Contract

Status Level: 45/45

HP: 551

MP: 432

STR: 286

VIT: 220

AGI: 275

INT: 192

MGC: 231

DEX: 190

Skills

Espionage: Lv 4

Wind Magic: Lv 2
Court Etiquette: Lv 4
Presence Detection: Lv 5
Sword Techniques: Lv 7
Sword Arts: Lv 7
Blink: Lv 6
Fire Magic: Lv 4
Cooking: Lv 2
Undead Killer
Evil Killer
Insect Killer
Vigour Manipulation
Goblin Killer
Evil Resistance: Lv 1
Mental Stability
Demon Killer
Skillful Dismantling
Resolute
Sense of Direction
Magic Manipulation
Night Vision

Innate Skills

Magic Convergence

Special Skills

Black Cat's Divine Protection

Titles

Undead Killer
Match For a Thousand
Evil Killer
Insect Killer
Lord of Dismantling
Healer
Goblin Killer
She Who Slaughters
Skill Collector
Skill Maniac

Dungeon Conqueror
Big Game Eater
Demon Killer
Wielder of Flames
Wielder of Wind
Lord of Cooking

Equipment

Black Cat Set (Body Armour, Gloves, Shoes, Earring, Cloak, Belt)
Bracelet of Herculean Strength
Sacrificial Bracelet
Magician's Necklace

Fran had finally hit level 45. She'd capped herself out.

[...]

"..."

"Woof..."

Urushi and I both watched over Fran with bated breath as she opened and closed her palms as if to verify whether or not there'd been any changes.

[...Doesn't look like anything's any different.]

"Nn."

"Whimper..."

Damn it. It looked like my hunch had been right all along. Nothing happened to Fran; she didn't evolve.

[Don't worry about it too much, alright?]

"No problem."

[Really?]

“Nn. More importantly. Master ranked up too?”

“Right, yeah I did. I totally forgot because I was too caught up in everything.”

General Information

Name: Master

Wielder: Fran

Race: Intelligent Weapon

Attack: 622

MP: 4150/4150

Durability: 3950/3950

Magical Conductivity: A+

Skills

Appraisal: MAX

Appraisal Jamming

Transform

High Speed Self-Repair

Self Evolution 〈Rank 12 | Magic Stones: 6689/7800 | Memory: 112 | Evolution Points Remaining: 62〉

Self Modification (Superiorized)

Telekinesis

Lesser Telekinetic Amplification

Telepathy

Lesser Attack Boost

Space/Time Magic: MAX

Dimension Magic: Lv 1

Skill Sharing

Intermediate Status Boost (Wielder)

Lesser Recovery Boost (Wielder)

Eye of Empyrea

Unsealable

Lesser MP Boost

Knowledge of Magic Beasts

Sorcerer

Intermediate Memory Boost

Unique Skills

Principal of falsehood: Lv 5

Superior Skills

Sword Arts SP

Skill Taker SP

Doppelganger Synthesis SP

[I've got a whole 62 self evolution points. Looks like we'll be able to make ourselves a decent bit stronger.]

"Nn."

I couldn't help but feel good about the fact that I finally had over 600 base attack. I'd only ever seen a few with numbers that high.

Heh, I was finally strong enough to be worthy of a sword with a name, even without all my skills and what not. I'm no longer the same sword I once was! No way in hell I'll ever get depressed by appraising one of Gallus' swords ever again!

"Master. Grats."

"Woof."

[Thanks! Don't worry, you're next. We'll definitely find a way for you to evolve!]

"Nn!"

To that end, we'd need more information. I didn't know if Aurel actually knew anything about how Black Catkin were supposed to evolve, but he himself was still a beastkin that'd undergone an evolution, and thus, he might at least be able to point us in the right direction.

[Alright! Let's go meet that Dungeon Master so we can get Aurel to tell us what we want to know.]

"Nn."

“Woof!”

Chapter 165

An Encounter With the Dungeon Master

Urushi laid himself down at Fran's feet, as if trying to appeal for something.

"Woof!"

[Oh, right. Yup, you did level up, Urushi.]

Yeah I totally forgot that I was supposed to check Urushi's stats too.

General Information

Name: Urushi

Species: Darkness Wolf (Magic Wolf / Magic Beast)

State: Normal

Status Level: 30/50

HP: 754

MP: 865

STR: 401

VIT: 341

AGI: 507

INT: 317

MGC: 541

DEX: 271

Skills

Darkness Resistance: Lv 8

Darkness Magic: Lv 4

Sharp Nose: MAX

Espionage: Lv 7

Fang Techniques: Lv 6

Fang Arts: Lv 6

Shadow Dive: MAX

Shadow Transport: Lv 6
Air Jump: Lv 8
Fear: Lv 4
Vigilance: Lv 7
Presence Concealment: Lv 6
Regeneration: Lv 5
Deadly Poison Magic: Lv 2
Evil Energy Detection: Lv 1
Evil Energy Resistance: Lv 1
Blink: Lv 5
Muffle: Lv 6
Spirit Magic: Lv 5
Life Force Detection: Lv 8
Resistance to Mental Abnormalities: Lv 6
Claw Arts: Lv 1
Poison Magic: MAX
Echolocation: Lv 8
Howl: Lv 8
Shadow Slip: MAX
Dark Magic: MAX
Night Vision
Greater Poison Fang
Automatic HP Recovery
Automatic MP Recovery
Immune to Poison
Metamorphosis
Magic Manipulation

Unique Skills

Prey Absorption

Titles

Kin to the Sword

Kin to the God of Wolves

Equipment

Claw of Capture

Defeating the pill bug had allowed Urushi to gain a level; he'd finally hit level 30. He needed way more exp than Fran to get anywhere at all, but he was still gradually making gains.

"Urushi, strong."

[And I think he's learned a new skill too. I'm pretty sure he didn't used to have Claw Arts.]

He always did like battering his enemies with his front paws, but I guess he never really used his claws until after he equipped the Claw of Capture.

Urushi picked up a nearby rock and tossed it into the air. He watched it for a bit and used his hind legs to stand up while skillfully swiping at it with his front right paw. A series of claws extended the moment he attacked and easily split the rock in four. The attack appeared both fast and powerful, it could definitely be put to good use, especially when taking the Claw of Capture's paralysis effect into consideration.

"Nn. Urushi, cool."

"Woof!"

The fact that Urushi was praised made him so happy he nearly jumped for joy.

You know, Urushi was actually pretty damned strong for a magic beast ranked in at a C ranked threat. His stats were relatively high, and he had an incredible amount of skills compared to the pill bug and basically everything else like it.

He might even end up being considered a B ranked threat if he just levels up and grows a bit more.

That said, he was lacking both in combat experience and composure. He also wasn't really like... wild enough. I guess that's kind of my fault because of how much I spoiled him, but how could I not? Just look at how adorable he is. He's capable of two way communication, and even listens to what we say even without the need for any sort of disciplinary action. He's practically a dog owner's wet dream.

In fact, he was only just responding to Fran petting his head by narrowing his eyes and wagging his tail. I mean, that's at least better than flipping over and showing his belly,

but, still. It'd probably be better for us to be a bit more strict with him.

"Master. What next?"

[Oh, right, I got side tracked, my bad.]

We shouldn't just be hanging around like usual. We didn't come all the way here just so we could beat up the boss. We were here to see the Dungeon Master.

I shoved the Disaster Pill Bug's corpse in storage and had us survey the boss room for the time being.

We were currently at what was supposedly the dungeon's deepest depths, but I expected a door or pathway of some sort to open up after we beat the boss regardless.

What actually happened differed from, but still kinda resembled what I'd expected. That is, a glimmering pillar of light appeared at the room's center after a bit of a short wait.

"Master. Something appeared."

[Looks like the info we got was spot on.]

The pillar was a teleportation device, specifically one that'd return all who entered it to the dungeon entrance. It'd normally be a helpful device as it'd save you the walk, but, it wasn't what we'd been looking for. Entering it would force us back out the dungeon.

[Let's try investigating the room and seeing if we can find anything.]

"Nn."



We looked around for about 10 minutes, but we weren't able to find any sort of hidden area.

Er, actually that's not right. I mean, we did technically find a spot that seemed like it had something on the other side, but we couldn't figure out how we were supposed to

get to it.

It wasn't like the other areas in the sense that the Dungeon Master had restricted access to it. Forcing ourselves in probably wasn't that great of an idea. We'd be putting not only the request, but also Fran's life at risk.

[Hmmm... What do?]

"Hmm?"

Oh wait. You know, thinking about it, it wasn't actually absolutely necessary for us to go to where the Dungeon Master was. We could just have her come out instead.

[Hey Fran, try showing off the pendant Aurel gave you.]

"Nn? Got it."

Fran rummaged through her dimensional storage and pulled the pendant out from within it.

[Now try calling the Dungeon Master.]

"Got it. Dungeon Master. Delivery."

She raised the pendant overhead as she spoke.

I was pretty sure that calling the Dungeon Master would work. We'd just beaten the boss, so chances were, the Dungeon Master probably had her eyes on us right about now.

And you know what, we can just try something else if it doesn't work. It's not like giving it a shot would cause any harm.

"Delivery here."

"Woof woof!"

"Are you perhaps on one of Dias' or Aurel's errands?"

A young woman's, presumably the Dungeon Master's, voice resounded through the room after we tried calling out a few times.

"Nn. Aurel."

"I see... Very well. I request you wait a brief moment."

A hole appeared in one of the walls shortly after the woman voiced her agreement. It seemed to lead to the area that we'd suspected just a bit earlier.

"You may enter."

The corridor didn't have any traps in it. Still, I couldn't help but worry that we'd be lead to a room full of magic beasts or traps. It wasn't impossible for the Dungeon Master to choose to do precisely that, so we proceeded with caution. I made sure to have a bit of teleportation magic queued up just in case.

However, our concerns ended up appearing to be in excess. There weren't any magic beasts anywhere to be found. The path was, well, just a normal path.

The passage's only defining traits were its dimness and the softness of the light that seemed to shine through from where it lead.

A magnificent sight reached us once we finally arrived at the tunnel's exit. The room it lead to looked like it'd come straight out of some noble's mansion. It was incredibly wide, and filled to the brim with all sorts of gaudy furniture.

A beautiful woman of about 30 years stood in the room's centre. The robe-like thing she wore made it look like she was in the midst of enjoying a sort of leisurely respite. Her body was rather slim, and her face charming, but I still couldn't help but feel that she gave off the air of a warrior, a perfect balance of strength and beauty.

She was strong, incredibly so. I knew it from the moment I first laid eyes on her, but I couldn't tell exactly how strong she was. Either way, she was at least stronger than we were. In fact, she was probably at least a match for Amanda.

I didn't feel any bloodlust or malice from her, so I managed to avoid putting myself on guard. However, I surely would've immediately switched to battle mode if we came across her under any other set of circumstances, especially so if we were in a dungeon, seeing as how dungeon goers had the tendency to be more easily aggravated.

To be honest, I actually tried appraising her, but it seemed she had access to Appraisal Jamming, and thus, I wasn't able to really get many details out of it. I only managed to learn her name, confirm the fact that she was the Dungeon Master, and figure out a few of her skills.

That said though, my attention had already been drawn elsewhere.

Her head sported a pair of black cat ears, and her rear a black tail. Both of these identifying features were ones that I was rather familiar with. They practically looked identical to Fran's, after all.

[Is she a Black Catkin...?]

"You've done well to venture this far. I welcome you, fellow sister of the Black Cat Tribe."

"Nn!"

Fran immediately took to her right knee with her left fist pressed against the ground the moment the woman welcomed her. She'd placed her right hand behind her back and placed it on her waist.

"Thank you for gracing me with your presence. I believe this to be our first meeting. I am Fran, of the Black Cat Tribe."

Fran kicked her Court Etiquette skill into full swing and bowed whilst speaking in a manner that completely differed from her usual one. Her greeting was not like that of a retainer, but more so like that of someone acknowledging another's superiority. I guess that's just a beastkin thing?

"And I am Rumina, Warrior to the Black Cat Tribe and the master of this dungeon."

I knew it, she was a Black Catkin, but that doesn't really explain why Fran suddenly went all out with the etiquette. I was confused, but didn't have to wait all that long to find out, as the pair's next exchange provided the answer I'd been looking for.

"Might I presume you to be a Black Tigerkin?"

“Fuhahaha, that is correct. Allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Rumina, one of the Black Cat Tribe’s Black Tigerkin.”

Ah, so that’s it. Fran’s respect stemmed from the fact that the person that stood before her was one that’d achieved her goal.

“Again, I welcome you to my domain.”

Chapter 166

Of Rumina and Hope

[I'm honestly surprised you had it figured out.]

(Had what?)

[The fact that she was a Black Tigerkin in particular. I mean, this is your first time ever even hearing about the fact that Black Catkin could actually evolve, right?]

(Given, since same tribe. Can tell just by looking.)

Oh, right, I remember her saying a bit ago that Beastkin could differentiate between the evolved and unevolved. I guess the fact that they're both Black Catkin only deepens her understanding of Rumina's state all the more.

"I will prepare you a seat. Do make use of it."

"Okay."

Rumina, the Dungeon Master, went out of her way to procure Fran a chair. It seemed that she wasn't a bad person despite the fact that she was extremely intimidating.

Fran rose from her prior position and seated herself in the chair Rumina had prepped for her. You know, this is the first time I've ever seen her listen to anyone other than myself with such a degree of earnestness. She was acting in the same manner as one would upon meeting some sort of celebrity or hero that they'd always looked up to.

In fact, her eyes almost seemed to sparkle every time she looked in Rumina's direction. Likewise, her ears and tail both continued to move around restlessly. I could only gauge the manner in which she was acting to be normal. The person before her held the key that'd allow her realize her desires, or at least the closest thing to it.

"That wolf of yours... No, nevermind me. Let us disregard my mention of the topic and move on."

“Woof.”

Urushi was sitting on the carpet with his limbs sprawled, not because he’d gotten attached to Rumina, but instead because he understood that he should listen to her because she was above him, and therefore should not be offended. Yup, that’s a canine for you.

“I believe you stated that you came on Aurel’s behalf?”

“This.”

“Oh...? So that is what he intended.”

Rumina nodded in acknowledgement after taking the pendant from Fran’s hands and looking it over.

“It appears to be genuine.”

She fiddled with something at the pendant’s centre and flipped it open to reveal a small piece of paper. It seemed that the paper was actually what we’d been tasked to deliver.

Rumina unfolded the piece of paper, the letter, and looked over its contents with a bit of a pondering expression.

“Nn!”

“Growl!”

An incredible amount of bloodlust leaked out of Rumina’s body. It’d been sustained for but an instant, but the sheer strength of it had caused Fran to jump with a start, and Urushi to growl whilst raising his body.

“Apologies. I merely happened to recall an unpleasant memory.”

Rumina smiled a gentle, refreshing smile. The bloodlust that stemmed from her body was nowhere to be seen — not that it’d been directed towards us in the first place.

Whew, that had me on edge. It seemed that the same had happened to Fran, as she only just managed to sit herself back down.

“Provide that Aurel kid with my acknowledgement.”

Rumina handed Aurel’s pendant back to Fran.

“Pendant?”

“I’ve no longer any need for it. Return it to Aurel.”

Turned out she really didn’t care about the pendant itself.

“Got it.”

Wait, did she just call Aurel a kid? I swear the dude’s like at least 70. The hell? Rumina looks like she’s around 30.

“Rumina, seems young?”

“Hahaha! You are quite the brave one. I believe this to be the first time anyone has ever asked my age since I became this dungeon’s master.”

Rumina’s words didn’t carry even the slightest hint of anger. In fact, she instead regarded Fran with a kind, grandmotherly expression. It seemed that she was acting a bit more relaxed than she otherwise would have because she and Fran were of the same tribe. Likewise, Fran was continuing to act rather respectfully despite having reverted back to her usual curt manner of speech. I guess that’s just what it meant to be of the same tribe; the relationship they shared was just flat out special.

“I’ve stopped keeping tally ever since becoming a Dungeon Master, but I believe I should at least be five hundred years of age.”

According to Rumina, she stopped aging the moment she became a Dungeon Master. She could apparently only die if the dungeon core was destroyed if someone was to actually just straight up murder her.

“It is possible for Dungeon Masters to alter their appearances through the use of magic, but I myself have chosen to remain as I was on the day that I was first changed.”

In other words, Rumina had lived a long life despite her appearance and attained evolution with her very own hands.

“Rumina.”

“What is it?”

Fran righted her seating posture and gazed in Rumina’s direction. In doing so, she conveyed to the other party that she wanted to talk about something serious. Rumina seemed to catch her drift, as she returned the younger catgirl’s gaze.

“Black catkin... can evolve?”

Fran cut straight to the point and asked the about the one thing she wanted to know about most.

Rumina had the answer and was right before us, but I still couldn’t help but worry that she wouldn’t be able to get her hands on what she sought.

“...”

Fran held her breath and squeezed her hands in anticipation; a moment of silence persisted as she stared straight at Rumina and awaited her answer.

“Without a doubt.”

“I see.”

Fran was flooded with a whole assortment of emotions, all at once. They were so fierce and numerous that they rendered her unable to provide anything but a short response. She didn’t just feel joy or hope. She also recalled all the hardships that she’d gone through, all the her frustrations and pains. Above all, there was relief. She learned that the path she’d walked was not one travelled in vain.

That single short phrase of her’s carried with it every single one of her feelings.

“I want... to evolve.”

“Yes, and?”

“Please tell me what I need to do to evolve.”

Fran immediately placed both her hands on the table and lowered her head as she awaited Rumina’s answer. Chances were she probably would’ve totally genuflected or prostrated had she been on the ground.

I too focused all my attention on Rumina and awaited her reply.

“I would love to instruct you my method of evolution.”

“Then!”

Fran lifted her face as her body leaned itself in Rumina’s direction. Her face was flushed, and her mouth half open. She was clearly as excited as could be.

But Rumina’s next words cut it all short.

“But that is not meant to be... I cannot directly convey to you my methodologies in their entirety.”

“Why...?”

Fran’s expression twisted into one of desperation.

“I am sorry...”

“...”

Fran fell back into her seat like a puppet with its strings cut. She probably would’ve totally fallen over if not for her chair’s backrest.

She was very clearly disappointed. The key that’d allow her to achieve her goal had been dangled in front of her only to be taken away before she had any chance of actually grabbing at it.

Still, I think she did a good job holding in her discontent.

Rumina's expression did the same as Fran's and darkened. But unlike Fran, her eyes were filled with pain.

"My sincerest apologies. I would have been willing to tell you it all if I was not a Dungeon Master."

"Meaning...?"

"The Goddess of Chaos grants upon Dungeon Masters a large number of blessings. We are given the ability to manage a dungeon and eternal youth, but blessings are not all we are given. The goddess also binds us with a curse."

Rumina informed us that she wasn't able to tell us too much. She was restricted in her speech with regards to the dungeon and its workings.

She wasn't capable of conveying any restricted information, be it through speech or writing.

"So Goddess of Chaos related to Black Catkin evolution?"

"Indeed. We of the Black Cat Tribe were shackled by the will of the Gods five hundred years prior. Thus, I am now the last Black Tigerkin."

"One question."

"Very well. I shall answer any question I am capable of answering."

"Black Catkin, evolution impossible?"

"That would be incorrect. It is simply difficult for our members to attain evolution."

Rumina's answer hit Fran with a wave of relief. It seemed she could have hope so long as it was still possible.

"Okay. But, why Gods made more difficult?"

"That... I cannot tell you, for I know not the answer."

"Then, how to evolve in the past?"

“Kuh... Apologies. I cannot tell you that either.”

Rumina clenched her teeth and lowered her gaze. It seemed that she was feeling just as frustrated as Fran was. She wanted to help her fellow tribesman evolve, but was simply unable to.

“What... if I was to tell you...”

“Nn?”

“What manner of choice would you make if I was to tell you that you could evolve if you simply chose to slay me?”

Chapter 167

The Extent of a Black Tigerkin's Power

Rumina suddenly suggested something that I could only describe as outrageous.

“What manner of choice would you make if I was to tell you that you could evolve if you simply chose to slay me?”

“If I... kill you?”

“’Tis just hypothetical, but do give me an answer.”

“Won’t kill.”

Fran’s reaction came immediately.

Her response was exactly what I’d expected it to be. Fran wanted to evolve, not for vanity, but for the sake of her tribe’s pride. There was simply no way she’d be willing to trade the life of one that’d accomplished her goal in order to fulfill it. Plus, Dias had totally nailed into us the fact that we weren’t allowed to kill the Dungeon Master — not that I thought we were actually capable of doing so in the first place.

The guild would end up labeling us a traitor even if we actually did manage to kill her, so in that sense, we technically just couldn’t.

“So that is your answer... It was exactly what I had expected it to be. Quite the resemblance you bear...”

“Nn?”

“I was merely rambling, do not mind me nor the odd question I posed. Unfortunately, that is all I have to tell you regarding evolution.”

Why’d she just ask us that? Could it maybe... be true? Nah, no way, right? I mean, she wouldn’t have been able to ask us the question if that were to be the case. But like,

would she really ask us something like that for literally no reason? It had to be some sort of hint, at the very least.

Was killing another member of the black cat tribe supposed to be what'd allow her to evolve? Or what about maybe just killing a Dungeon Master of some sort? Wait no, can't be that one. We'd already killed that one Goblin Dungeon Master guy already.

Hmmm, iunno. I don't get it.

"It is not much for consolation, but do have yourself a cup of a tea."

Rumina offered Fran a drink and started talking to her about the Black Cat Tribe's village in an attempt to cheer her up. It seemed that the two were able to converse as much as they'd like so long as the topic didn't pertain to evolution.

She described that it was normal for Black Catkin to evolve 500 years ago, back before she became the dungeon's master. They didn't used to be considered as inferior to any of the other beastkin races. In fact, they'd been one of the most respected tribes. She wasn't able to tell us too many details about what had happened way back then, but, she recounted what she could.

I couldn't really understand the exact extent to which the Goddess restricted one's ability to disclose information, but it evidently stopped her from talking about evolution or the reasons for which the Black Catkin ended up under their current circumstances in the first place.

The Black Cat Tribe's history had practically been wiped clean off the board. The only people that still knew it were probably the elves, seeing as how they were long lived. I'd really like to talk to one and ask why the gods wanted to go as far as even making it seem like Black Catkin were unable to evolve.

Fran and Rumina ended up having a fairly long conversation despite the fact that they weren't able to discuss evolution. Neither had met another Black Catkin in quite a long while, so they really hit it off.

"Ah, right... I do have one last matter I'd like to ask of you, if you would not mind it."

"Nn. Won't mind anything."

“Hahaha, worry not. It is nothing difficult. I would simply like to ask you to convey to Dias a message for me.”

“Dias? Not Aurel?”

“Yes, Dias. My message to him is but a single phrase: Fulfill the contract. Do well to remember it.”

“Got it.”

“Have you anything you would like to request of me in return? I will do for you anything that I am capable of.”

“Request?”

“Indeed.”

Rumina’s question caused Fran to fall into thought. I was fairly certain that she was thinking of and dismissing a whole slew of ideas.

(Master?)

[She did say you ask for whatever you wanted, so just do that. Voice whatever happens to come to mind.]

“Got it.”

“Have you a request?”

“Nn.”

Fran quietly nodded as she looked at Rumina with a gaze like that of a warrior.

“Want to spar?”

“Oh?”

“Want to see extent of Black Tiger’s power.”

I had to say, it really was like Fran to want something like this. She wanted to experience first hand the power that she sought.

Rumina responded to Fran's request with a heartfelt, entertained smile.

"Very well. I shall show you my strength. I will, however, first require a moment, as I must prepare."

"Nn."

"I shall provide you a servant for the time being. Order it as you will."

A wooden doll, much like the ones used in character design, materialized in response to Rumina's words.

It refilled Fran's cup with movements as fluid as those of a human.

"Thanks."

The doll not only nodded in response to Fran, but also retrieved some cookies and chocolate from a shelf in one of the room's corners before presenting them as if serving her.

From the aforementioned actions, I understood that it was basically Rumina's familiar despite the fact that it wasn't capable of speech.

"Nn. Tasty."



"I seem to have kept you waiting for quite the amount of time."

"Nn?"

Rumina returned after ten odd minutes. She claimed to be ready, but looked exactly the same as she had before setting out.

She was still wearing the same thing, a thin outfit made of cloth that seemed to resemble a noble's casual wear. Her body hadn't been decorated with even a single

piece of armour.

Her sword was pretty sharp, but it didn't emanate any magical power; it didn't seem to have any special properties or abilities.

"Follow after me."

Rumina lead us to a dome-shaped room with a diameter about a hundred meters across.

"I have only just made this room, and thus, 'tis a bit dreary. Unfortunately, it was all I could prepare as I hadn't a suitable space for us to spar in. Have you any particular complaints with this space?"

Apparently, Rumina hadn't gone off to prepare any sort of armour. She had instead been working on preparing a room. Yup, that's a Dungeon Master for ya. The scale she thinks on is completely different from our own.

(Master, just watch.)

[Yeah, I know. You do you.]

I mean, it's not like they're fighting for real. It's just a spar, so yeah.

"Shall we start?"

"No equipment?"

"Oh? Have you confidence in your ability to land a blow?"

"Of course."

"Hahaha! How spirited you are. Fear not, my clothes have been enhanced through the magical arts. It offers greater defenses than most armours crafted of metal. I have also in my possession a Sacrificial Bracelet."

"Got it."

"Now then, I believe it should be time for us to begin?"

“Nn!”

And begin they did. Rumina, like Fran, was a swordsman. The way she traded blows with Fran demonstrated the fact that she was highly skilled.

Her Appraisal Jamming skill made it so I was only able to pick up on her detection based skills, so I was only now able to find out that she was capable of casting magic. That is, I could tell at a glance that she had access to the Magic Manipulation skill.

They began at a milder pace, and probed at each other for the sake of evaluating each other’s skill. From there, the two gradually picked up the pace and started swinging in sharper, faster manners.

“Splendid! Your skill with the sword is incredible for one of such a young age.”

“Nn!”



“What? Can you no longer keep up?”

“Haaah!”

“You have erred! Your blow would have been much more effective had you taken another step forward.”

Rumina was, as one would expect, much more skilled than Fran. The older Black Catkin had the liberty to verbalize the other’s mistakes despite her going all out. Her precise manner of doing so was like that of a coach or teacher.

“That is not all you have, is it? Display to me all you can!”

“Nn. Fire Javelin!”

Fran created a spear wreathed in flame as she threw yet another slash. Her plan had been to distract Rumina in order to land a blow with a two pronged attack, but her attempts ended in utter failure. The flames hadn’t been enough to offer even the slightest distraction.

“You are far too naive! A spell like that fails to so much as even serve as a distraction!”

“Nn!”

Their battle transformed from one purely based in swordplay to a fierce exchange of spells. Rumina turned out to be capable of using both the fire and wind elements.

The two fought for what felt like an hour.

Fran was out of breath. Rumina, on the other hand, merely looked satisfied.

“You are incredibly strong for a Black Catkin that has yet to evolve. You will surely become strong enough to leave your name in history should you find a path to evolution.”

She spoke with a smile, but quickly twisted her expression into a more stern one.

“It is about time for us to bring this session to an end. I shall do you the favour of putting a portion of the very power you desire on display for my last act. Worry not, I shan’t kill you.”

“Bring it on.”

My blade trembled as an incredible amount of magical energy suddenly burst out of Rumina’s body. Holy crap. She had to be at least as strong as Rynford.

“Then here I come... Lightning Rush!”

I’m not sure if it was because of I was super focused on her or what, but everything Rumina had said sounded clear to me despite the fact that she’d muttered the first half of it. The attack she launched caused an incredibly bright flash and sent Fran flying across the room.

Chapter 168

Lightning Rush

“Lightning Rush!”

Fran flew; the attack that followed Rumina’s shout launched her a whole 30 meters. Her body sank into and shattered the wall despite it looking like it was made of a rather tough material.

Holy fuck! The hell just happened!? The attack was so quick that I couldn’t see shit!

I had no idea exactly how it all happened, but Rumina was now standing exactly where Fran had been just a moment ago. We, on the other hand, had been sent flying. I mean, I did feel like we’d gotten hit by something, but I wasn’t able to tell what that something had been.

Only a few moments after receiving the attack did I finally begin to process any information pertinent to it. The attack’s name, the fact that I’d felt a slight shock right as Rumina collided with us, and the smoking burn mark on Fran’s chest all pointed towards the fact that she’d attacked us with something based in the lightning element.

[Fran! You okay?]

“Ugh... Heal.”

Fran coughed up a wad of blood as if to evidence that her internals had suffered a good bit of damage. Luckily, it looked like she was still alive and kicking regardless.

Rumina really had followed through with her declaration. She’d inflicted a pretty major injury, but Fran had managed to live through it. It seemed that she’d only used this attack because she’d become convinced of the fact that Fran would be able to tank it.

“Are you alright? I accidentally put a slight excess of force into the attack as it has been far too long since I have had the chance to enjoy a battle like this one.”

Though it looked like she messed up a bit.

“I had only intended on blowing you aback.”

Rumina hurried over and used a potion on Fran.

Man, just what the hell was that Lightning Rush thing anyways? It was so damn fast that I honestly couldn't tell.

That, however, didn't mean I didn't have any idea as to its identity. The term Innate Skill floated through my mind despite the fact that I had no confirmation as to whether or not she'd even used a skill in the first place. Rumina's words had mentioned that she wanted to show Fran what was to come, that she would show her a Black Tigerkin's power. In other words, the attack she just showcased would logically be a skill innate to Black Tigerkin.

Though I hadn't been able to observe it, I had at least learned that the epitome of strength still lay far beyond.



“It is regrettable, but I must not keep you in a pen with me in perpetuity.”

Rumina spoke to Fran, whose wounds had been healed, in a tone filled with lament.

The younger Black Catkin seemed to feel the same, as her gaze was cast downwards in loneliness. However, her feelings were only second to her goal. It was mission critical for her to go back out into the world so she could find out more about evolution. We were still betting on us being able to get a few hints from Aurel seeing as how he'd gone out of his way to ask us to do this and everything.

I mean, I didn't think him sending us here was just a coincidence, as he knew Rumina. He himself had evolved as well, so I figured there was no way he didn't know she herself was someone that'd evolved. He also knew that Fran was a Black Catkin. Throw in all those factors, and you have for yourself something that could only possibly be some sort of setup.

In fact, it almost felt like he'd only acted in order to acquaint Fran and Rumina with

one another. It would only make sense for him to know something about the Black Cat Tribe's evolution, or at least something that'd be of help to us.

"The teleportation device left in the boss room has yet to deactivate. Entering it will allow you to return to the dungeon entrance."

"Can meet again in future...?"

"Hahaha. That, I would enjoy. I shall arrange it so that you will have the opportunity to visit me simply by visiting the boss room. "

"Nn. Got it."

Rumina ruffled Fran's hair, which caused the younger girl's eyes to narrow and ears to twitch in delight.



[You sure you're all set?]

(Nn.)

The two stalled for about 10 or so minutes because they were rather reluctant to part. I myself thought it'd be fine for the two to enjoy a bit more time together, but Fran herself had decided it was time to go. She said goodbye to Rumina and started walking back towards the boss room.

"Farewell."

"Nn."

Fran turned back several times, but eventually managed to get herself to leave, albeit whilst looking back in Rumina's direction.

"Bye bye."

"A path to your goal most definitely exists. 'Tis narrow and full of obstacles, but it is not one you will be unable to traverse so long as you persevere."

“Nn!”

Rumina gave her one last shout of encouragement as the the teleportation circle’s light enveloped us and brought us back up to the surface.

The dungeon’s entrance looked just the same that it had a few days ago.

[I guess we might as well go hit up Aurel and tell him we’re done.]

We tried to leave the fortress that surrounded the place in order to make our way over to Aurel’s mansion, but we weren’t able to as we were almost immediately swarmed by the guards and adventurers in the area.

Apparently the adventurers standing right outside the dungeon had noticed that we teleported in, and immediately started spreading the news.

“Damn! Looks like she’s back in one piece.”

“You just teleported, right? Doesn’t that mean you beat the boss?”

“Really gotta give it to her. That’s the girl subjugated those dirty thieves for you.”

“You planning to stay solo? Cause my party would be glad to have ya.”

“She’d be much more at home in our party. We’ve got way more girls than you guys.”

Holy crap. Everyone was acting like they loved us.

It seemed that beating the boss, and by extension, teleporting back to town, was a status symbol of sorts, an act that earned the respect of Ulmutt’s adventurers. This held especially true if the dungeon in question was the eastern one, seeing as how it was the more difficult of the two.

The fact that she was young and entirely solo, Urushi aside, only made her achievement shine all the more.

All ten or so of the adventurers bombarded us with their questions and comments. The answers she gave them caused their eyes to sparkle as they raised their voices in wonder. Even hardened veterans far older than herself were looking at her with

admiration. I thought it to be a rather funny sight, but Fran seemed happy, so all was good.

“You charged into a horde of High Ogres all by yourself?”

“Wow, I can’t believe you actually managed to disarm that trap!”

“What was the boss like?”

A certain blob of muscle raced over and liberated Fran from the onslaught shortly after it started.

“Mmkay everyone, that’ll be it for questions.”

“Erza.”

“It’s been so long since I last saw you! I was so worried cause you never came back out of the dungeon.”

“Nn. Was training.”

“I know, but I just couldn’t help but be worried.”

Erza’s eyes dampened as he twisted his body back and forth on the spot. It looked like he really was worried about her. I mean, I was grateful that he was, but I honestly couldn’t stand how uncute his actions were.

“And I’m sure you’re just exhausted from the boss fight, mh,m. This dungeon’s really well known for how it likes to throw bosses that scale with you and work against your weaknesses. You’re really strong Fran, so I’m sure you would’ve gotten a magic beast whose threat level was at least a C.”

“Nn. Got one.”

“Weally? Are you okay? You’re not hurt, right?”

“Already healed.”

“Already? So you really did get hurt? Waaaaow, I really should’ve come with you.

Everything would've been totally A-Ok."

"But then not good for training."

"Mhmm. That's true. You know, I really love how stoic you are Fran. It's so adorbs. Being able to beat a C ranked threat with just you and your puppers means you're reallllly strong too."

Wait, why's Erza here anyways? Is this just a coincidence, or?

"Hey sis, Erza, weren't you here because you had something you wanted to talk about?"

"Ah, right! Yeah, I did!"

Apparently it wasn't any sort of coincidence, as one of the guards that'd promptly called out to the buff dude had also stated that he had actually asked to be notified when Fran appeared back in town. Said guard also reminded him that he apparently did have some sort of business.

"Whoopsie daisy. Sorry, I almost forgot. I was just super excited because I hadn't seen Fran in so long."

Oh god why. Please, no. Please never stick your tongue out and wink at the same time ever again.

I mean, I knew Erza was actually a pretty good guy, but that's just gross.

"Something?"

"Mhm! But it's not something we can talk about out in the open, so let's head back to the guild first."

"But need to tell Aurel quest clear."

[We can have the Guildmaster just send him a message or something, so there shouldn't be any issue with us heading there first.]

"Nn? On second thought, will go to guild first."

“Is that really okay? Are you sure you don’t need to talk to the old man first?”

“No issues.”

And so, we had Erza lead us back to the guild.

Chapter 169

The Lion-Topped Carriage

A sudden but important reminder popped itself into my head as we made our way in the guild's direction.

[You think leveling up Thought Isolation might be a good idea seeing as how we're about to have to talk to the Guildmaster?]

(Nn. Sounds good since still level 1.)

[Yeah, but there kinda is a problem. Iunno how he'll react to us suddenly having the skill at a decent level.]

If I was him I'd think it pretty sketchy for us to suddenly have something that'd stop him from reading our minds.

(Already too late. Identity as intellegent weapon already exposed.)

[Hmm. Is it really too late?]

(Nn. Justification, can just say used Master's ability. Master just that amazing.)

[Seriously?]

(Nn. Since Intelligent Weapon.)

You know, now that I think about it, I might actually be pretty awesome. The fact that I knew about the Divine Blades had always made me think of myself as an inferior good. I mean, I at least had enough confidence to think if I'd be targeted if people found out about me, but that was pretty much it. Reflecting on it from a more logical standpoint made me actually seem rather desirable, as Intelligent Weapons were better than Magic Swords, but not as good as Divine Blades.

In other words, the fact that I was an intelligent weapon could actually be used as a

pretty decent arbitrary excuse for when we wanted to just bullshit through things. People wouldn't really find it odd because of how strange Intelligent Weapons were in the first place.

[True true.]

Eh, yeah, I was convinced that there weren't any detriments to actually going through with it, so I used up 18 of my self evolution points and just flat out maxed the skill.

〈Thought Isolation has reached its maximum level. It has evolved into the the Perfect Thought Isolation skill.〉

Oh shit! The skill evolved? Sweet, Perfect Thought Isolation sounds hella awesome. Mind reading? Induced Thought? Come at me bro, I got this. The best part about the skill was that I could adjust the extent to which I blocked my thoughts out. I could use it to mess with people that could read minds by only allowing them to read specific thoughts.

(Other skills, what to do?)

[Would probably be better for us to just hold onto them for now and think things through a bit more carefully first.]

I had a limited number of points, so it'd be best for me to be a bit more prudent in their use.

[Let's think carefully about how we want to use them.]

(Nn. Got it.)

I was thinking of leveling up the Divine Sword Arts skill myself, but I didn't really mind relinquishing the points to some other skill if Fran wanted to, seeing as how she was the one that was going to be using them and all.

That was especially true because of the fact that she was more creative than me. She came up with some pretty interesting stuff back when we were fighting Rynford, so I was really looking forward to seeing what she'd be able to think of and pull off in the future.



Erza stopped just a bit before we arrived at the guild.

“Hmph. It’s started getting really crowded. Everyone’s in our way.”

There were a lot more people here than there were where we were a few minutes ago. To make matters worse, they weren’t just walking along or anything either. They’d all gathered up in a crowd, which in turn made it more difficult for us to get through them.

[You think something happened?]

“Erza. Something happened?”

“It seems like a bunch of high ranking foreign nobles have just arrived in town. They’re here to watch the Martial Arts Tournament because it’s coming up soon. It’s just going to keep getting worse from here on out because we’ll be getting a huge influx of nobles and adventurers. Everything always gets really crowded around this time of year. It’s Ulmutt’s busiest season.”

Ohhhhh. So the nobles are taking up basically the whole road and making everyone else sit off to the side while they do? I guess that means it’s kinda like, but not as bad as the old Japanese Daimyo stuff they used to do; everyone here has to just sit and wait until they’re through.

“I think we should just take the high road from here.”

“Got it.”

I looked down on the crowd from Fran’s back as she leapt onto the rooftop

In doing so, I saw the most extravagant looking carriage I’d ever seen since reincarnating. The wooden lion stuck on its roof looked so real that could honestly see it coming to life at any given moment. Its body was crafted of a lustrous ebony, and its ornaments a gaudy mix of gold and silver. Much to my surprise, its near excessive decorations didn’t make it look vulgar or over the top, but instead caused it to give off an elegant air.

Even a single glance was enough for me to tell that they weren’t just your everyday

low end nobles.

The only thing I didn't get was why they had so few escorts. Their carriage looked like something that'd normally be accompanied by dozens of guards.

I actually couldn't believe that it was totally exposed to danger save for the coachman and the pair of guards that stood to its left and right. It wasn't even a part of a caravan or anything like that either. I knew that we were in a in town right now and all that, but still, weren't the people inside of the damn thing being you know, a bit too careless?

Or so I thought... until I observed the coachman and the carriage's two guards in more detail.

[Damn, they look strong.]

Just looking at the way they carried themselves made me intuitively realize that they were extremely capable.

[Hmmm, I should be able to get away with it if I do it right now...]

I wanted to appraise all three of the people outside the carriage, but Fran was moving too quickly, and made it so I was only capable of appraising one of the two guards.

[Whaaaa?]

(Master. Problem?)

[Nothing really important. Just that carriage's guard is hella stronk.]

I knew he'd be strong, but I'd never been expecting him to be *that* strong.

General Information

Name: Goldalfa

Age: 44

Race: Beastkin (White Rhino Tribe / Black Steel Rhino)

Job: Sharpaxer
Status Level: 72/99
HP: 1256
MP: 422
STR: 654
VIT: 582
AGI: 267
INT: 173
MGC: 247
DEX: 299

Skills

Intimidation: Lv 8
Super Herculean Strength: Lv 8
Herculean Strength: MAX
Fist Techniques: Lv 5
Fist Arts: Lv 5
Presence Detection: Lv 3
High Speed Regeneration: Lv 4
Regeneration: MAX
Club Techniques: Lv 6
Club Arts: Lv 6
Mining: Lv 8
Resistance to Abnormal Status: Lv 7
Blink: Lv 3
Resistance to Mental Abnormalities: Lv 7
Elemental Blade: Lv 8
Greater Earth Resistance: Lv 4
Charge: Lv 7
Axe Techniques: MAX
Axe Arts: MAX
Divine Axe Techniques: Lv 6
Divine Axe Arts: Lv 7
Magic Perception: Lv 3
Vigour Mastery
Goblin Killer
Dampened Sense of Pain
Dragon Killer
Strengthened Skin

Innate Skills

Awakening
Shockwave

Titles

He Who Protects
He Who Is Like a Great Mountain
Dungeon Conqueror
Dragon Killer
A Ranked Adventurer

Equipment

Earth Dragon Horn Great Axe
Earth Dragon Scale Armour
Sticky Flame Spirit Mantle
Bodyguard's Bracelet
Ring of Poison Detection

Shit, he's an A ranked adventurer, and an evolved beastkin too. He was just as strong as Amanda. Were the other two like that too? I guess that explains their lack of other guards. They literally don't need them. Actually, having three people that strong is already just flat out excessive. The three of them would honestly probably be able to just totally roll the entire city of Ulmutt all on their own.

Fran turned back in excitement the moment I told her about him.

(Amazing! Rhino tribe famous for strength, but few in number.)

[Wow, really?]

You know, thinking about it, this is actually my first time seeing any rhino beastkin, which kinda makes sense if they're really rare. That said, the guy just kinda just looks like a human with a big frame.

Both the Super Herculean Strength and Vigour Mastery skills caught my interest.

I didn't get to appraise either skill, but I figured they were the respective upgrades to

Herculean Strength and Vigour Manipulation. I was interested in his innate skills as well, but I couldn't appraise or intuit either, so they were left as unknowns for the time being.

We might be able to find the answer if we do a bit of research at the guild or ask Aurel or something. He's got a tonne of experience, so he might know. Moreover, there's actually a fair chance he might have some info on the person himself as well.

(Nn. Will ask!)

It seemed Fran herself was totally on board and going full steam ahead.

Chapter 170

Dias' Secret

Dias greeted us with a surprised look on his face upon our return to the guild and ascent into his room.

"You've already beat the boss? That was pretty quick."

"Nn."

It seemed he didn't expect us to already be done with the place, which I guess did make sense seeing as how we were training and all that. It probably would've taken like twice as long if not for my ability to level up skills through the absorption of magic stones.

"Message from Rumina. Fulfill contract."

"Oh my. Who's Rumina?"

"Sorry Erza, that's a bit of a secret."

Apparently everything about Rumina was supposed to be a secret kept even from Erza.

Whoops...

"Mmkay. Don't worry, I get it."

"Sorry. Thanks."

"Teehee. A good woman is one that doesn't ask too many questions."

Erza seemed to catch onto to what was going on and dropped the topic immediately after winking. His quick response seemed to stem from the fact that he was completely aware of the difference in status between him and the Guildmaster, and that he wasn't

qualified to listen in on what we almost started discussing.

It'd be better for us to just move on to the next topic for the time being.

"Finished several requests."

"I see. What exactly have you finished? We might as well verify it all now."

"This, this..."

Fran pulled out all the sheets representing requests she'd completed. She first started with the 9 kill quests before working her way into the fetch quests. Unfortunately, it didn't seem like we managed to hit the 23 quest threshold Dias had told us we needed.

"Mind showing me your dungeon card?"

"Nn. Here."

"Hmmm, these are some nice results. You really have finished all the kill quests."

"Wow Fran, you're so awesome. Mhmm, yes you are~"

Dias and Erza were both surprised by the results shown on Fran's dungeon card, as it informed them of all the magic beasts she'd slain.

Apparently, it was normal for adventurers to avoid battle if possible. We, on the other hand, did the exact opposite and basically mowed down everything in our way, so we ended up killing a tonne more monsters than they'd been expecting.

"Wow Fran! Even a whole party of D rankers would normally struggle to kill this many. Mhmm."

"You should have enough materials to finish quite a few of your fetch quests too, right? Have you dismantled everything already?"

"Nn. Done already."

"Could you put everything over there then?"

“Got it.”

Erza had already laid out a vinyl-like sheet for us to put stuff on so that we wouldn't dirty the floor with blood or whatever.

We laid our materials up on top of it, starting with the High Ogre's horns and the Mimic Venom Crawler's poison sacks. Erza was watching, so we made sure we made it look like we were taking things out of the cloth bag Fran had as opposed to my storage space.

Fran treated the poison sack with great care. Neither Erza nor Dias would probably die even if we messed up and popped the thing, but it'd still be a pain in the ass to clean up after. They'd probably still get mad at us anyways too.

“They're in good condition and of a pretty high quality. Do you want to turn them all in for your quests?”

“Yes.”

“All in all, you've completed a total of 17 quests. Actually, 18 counting the boss' subjugation. You'll be able to rank up if you do 5 more.”

“You're so close! Just a little bit more effort and you'll be there Fran!”

That posed us a bit of a problem. The only quests we had left required us to hunt rarer magic beasts like Dirty Wisps. It'd take us quite a bit of time to actually go through and get everything we needed.

Them being rare was bad enough, so the fact that they were also stealthy made finding them a nightmare. It was much harder for us to home in on them than it was for us to just kill whatever came at us.

We might end up having to spend even longer in the dungeon than we had last time.

Oh well, whatever. We can figure that out after we check in with Aurel. The tourney's coming up, and there's a chance we might actually have to wait till after it's done to actually dive back into the dungeon and get the stuff we need to rank up.

Dias sank into thought as Fran informed him of her plans.

“Hmm... So you’d like to rank up as quickly as possible?”

“Mmmm, I don’t really think it’s necessary. You’re already really well known for all the stuff you’ve done, so I don’t think there’ll really be anyone wanting to pick any fights with you anymore.”

Erza judged that it wasn’t needed, but Dias offered a contrasting opinion.

“That may be true for now, but I doubt it’ll apply for the adventurers that’ll be entering the city in the coming days.”

“Trueeee.”

“I guess that’s why she wants to rank herself up as soon as possible.”

“Nn.”

Again, there was something pretty important that was stopping us from running back into the dungeon and ranking up.

“Want to participate in tournament.”

You had to sign up at the Adventurer’s Guild, the Arena, or one of the many other venues set throughout the city unless you had a letter of recommendation. Said sign up started in three days.

Anyone that signed up would be refused unless they went in person and presented their papers. Registration by proxy was simply disallowed.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I can just hold onto your application for you.”

“But need to sign up in person.”

“You see, the guild’s actually got a fair number of recommendations left over, and we don’t see any reason not to hand one to a competent C ranked adventurer.”

Is that... really okay? Isn’t getting recommended by the guild kinda like a really big deal? It means effectively functioning as the guild’s representative, right? Don’t you

need to not only be strong but also really polite and stuff?

“Don’t worry about the technicalities, administrative stuff or anything else. We’re the ones that asked you to rank yourself up in the first place, so there’s no harm in us doing you a favour or two in exchange. We’ll handle everything, so feel free to just go hole yourself up in the dungeon some more and get all your stuff done with.”

Dias was acting suspicious. I couldn’t wrap my head around why he was treating us the way he was. I mean, I knew we had connections, and that both Amanda and Klimut were backing us, but he was still treating us way better than he should given that we were just D rankers. It was almost like he was doing everything he could to get us to go to and stay inside of the dungeon.

“Dias. Acting weird?”

“Hahaha, what’re you talking about? I’m just acting the same way I always do.”

“Really weird.”

“I agree with Fran. It seems like you’re a teensy bit rushed. It’s kinda like you’re up to something.”

Likewise, Erza also seemed to have realized that the old man wasn’t acting as he usually would, and ended up tilting his head in confusion.

“You’re just imagining things.”

“Are you trying to play some sort of prank on Fran again?”

“Again?”

“Nah, no way.”

Yeahhhhh, he’s definitely up to something, but I don’t think he’s about to let us in on what that something is no matter how much we poke at him, least not right now. I was stuck trying to think of some sort of solution, or at least I was until I saw Erza bring his face right up to Dias’ before speaking in a quiet tone of voice.

“I knew it. You really are up to something.”

“H-hahaha, you sure seem confident.”

“Call it the result of a woman’s intuition!”

So uh... I decided to set aside the idea of how reliable Erza’s “womanly intuition” would be and focused on something a bit more important: the fact that Erza, who’d known Dias for quite a long time, asserted that he was probably up to something, then he was probably up to something.

I guess it’d probably be best for us to play our trump card then.

[Fran, use *that*.]

“Nn!”

Fran pulled out Klimut’s letter and held it up as if she was showing it off. That, of course, wasn’t enough on its own, so she threw in a few extra lines for added effect.

“Dias. Speak truth.”

“H-haha... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Dias’ fear of Klimut was immediately demonstrated as his eyes began wavering the moment he saw the letter.

“Can tell you’re hiding something.”

“Oh come on... I swear you’re just imagining things.”

His voice wavered as well. Yeah, okay, I’m convinced now. He was definitely hiding something, and all we needed to figure out what that something was one last push.

“Will tell Klimut and Amanda that was pranked by Dias.”

“I’m sorry! I’m really sorry!”

The old Guildmaster leapt straight into the air before landing in a stance indicative of nothing but prostration. Yeah, gotta give it to him. He’s really got the physical

capabilities of an A ranked adventurer. The fact that he flew over his huge ass desk made it a 10/10 performance.

“I’m really, really sorry!”

“W-What just happened? Just what is that thing?”

Erza’s eyes moved between Fran and Dias; the look on his face was one of clear confusion. The sight of an old man grinding his face into the ground whilst prostrating to a child was one that could bring a grown man to tears, so his confusion was only justified, especially seeing as it all happened just cause said old man happened to see a certain letter.

“Erza. This branch, any Carrier Hawks?”

“Yuppers.”

“Nn. First, will send letter to Klimut...”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m really, really, really sorry. Please, anything but that.”

You know, he’d probably suffer a social death if word got out that he tried to play a prank on a little girl. Telling Amanda, however, would probably result in him experiencing an actual death.

“Then tell everything.”

“Alright. Maaaan, you’re so mean. Have you no mercy? I did so much for you too.”

We decided to wait till after we heard his case before we finally gave him a verdict.

Chapter 171

The Beast Lord

“Are you aware of the fact that a large number of nobles have been visiting the city as of late?”

“Nn.”

We kinda just saw them on our way over, so yeah.

“One of the visitors I just mentioned happens to have a special sort of status.”

“Special status?”

“Well, let’s just say said person happens to be the Beast Lord.”

“Really!? Wow, we’ve got some big names here this year.”

Erza’s expression changed into one of honest surprise. It seemed that the Beast Lord was apparently someone famous.

“Big name?”

“Oh my. I guess that means you must not know much about the Beast Lord.”

“Only heard name before.”

I haven’t.

“Well, you’re a beastkin yourself, so I think it you should learn a bit more about it. Mhmm.”

The Beast Lord was apparently a self-evident name; it was the title granted to the person that ruled over the Beastkin’s Country. The Beast Lord stood above all tribes and was respected by all beastkin regardless of whether or not they were the lord’s

countrymen. Its influence was so great that it held notable power within every single nation.

The Beastkin's Country itself was located on another one of the world's continent, but considered the Kingdom of Kranzel friendly regardless. The lord has been known to visit Ulmutt in order to watch it's famed Martial Arts Tournament once every few years as a show of goodwill.

"And this year just happens to be one of those years."

"Well, you sure make it sound like you don't like the Beast Lord's visits."

"That'd be because I already have enough on my plate. This year'll be especially busy with Fran here."

"Nn?"

What's that supposed to mean? We'd never met anyone like the Beast Lord before, so why's this sound like it's supposed to be some sort of big deal that relates to us?

"You see, it was said that the Blue Cat Tribe was the first to sell the Black Cat Tribe into slavery, but some say that their actions had actually been ones ordered by the Beast Lord. Typically speaking, the Beast Lord is chosen from amongst the Red Cat Tribe, or more specifically, their evolved members, the Golden Lionkin. The Blue Cat Tribe is known for taking action as under the Beast Lord's orders..."

"Wow, really? I never knew."

"That'd be because it's been considered a part of one of history's darker canals. Not even the citizens of the Beastkin's Country actively seek discussion about the topic."

It seemed that Fran hadn't know much about what was said either, as she was listening to Dias with an earnest look on her face.

"I don't really think I need to say this because it's rather obvious, but it's been a long time since the Black Catkin were first sold into slavery, and the Beast Lord that ruled back then has long died. Though, they do say that the Blue Cat Tribe still does function as one of the Beast Lord's agents."

Which means that it's possible that the Black Cat Tribe had been enslaved because the Beast Lord had willed it.

You know, thinking about it, that does actually seem quite possible. That kinda stuff happened back in my world too. History was stained with acts in which people used others as scapegoats and forced them into slavery and the other poor social circumstances in order to use them as scapegoats and appease the masses.

Selling off the Black Cat Tribe's members not only created said scapegoat and abated the common folk's dissatisfaction, but also also allowed the country to gain access to foreign currencies.

The Black Cat Tribe's members basically filled the role perfectly too, seeing as how they were both weak and unable to evolve.

"The current Beast Lord is especially unpopular. They pried the role from their predecessor in what may as well have been a coup d'etat."

"Oh, I heard about that too. They say the newest Beast Lord is a parricidal thief."

"I can't imagine a person like that having any good impressions on the Black Cat Tribe. In fact, it'll more likely than not be the opposite."

That... was some pretty important but bad news. It meant we had to be on guard around basically all other beastkin.

(Beast Lord...)

[You think the Beast Lord might've been in the carriage we saw just a bit ago?]

I recalled the carriage and the ridiculously powerful guards that protected it. Yeah, that kinda looked like it was probably the Beast Lord's carriage. The Beast Lord being some sort of Lionkin explained the lion that decorated the carriage's top. Ugh, what a pain. The Beast Lord was a foe we wouldn't be able to overcome, be it through political power or brute force. It was also supposedly an evolved beastkin, so I didn't really think we'd be able to win in a fight if it came down to it. That said, it wasn't like we already knew for a fact that the Beast Lord would actually antagonize us.

(Then... Assassinate?)

[Just... no. You're being way too over the top as far as the violence goes. The Beast Lord might not end up antagonizing us at all.]

Aw crap. It looked like Fran'd already been convinced that the Beast Lord was basically Hitler. I figured it would best for me be on my toes if we ever happened run into it. I was pretty sure Fran wouldn't like just suddenly attempt murder, but you know, just in case, right?

"The Beast Lord may end up taking an interest in you if they happen to catch wind of you, and let's just say I can't imagine anything good coming out of that."

"So you want her to stay in the dungeon so she can avoid meeting the Beast Lord?"

"Exactly. We can also protect her by giving her designated requests if she manages to hit C rank before the tournament starts."

"Designated Requests?"

I'd never heard of them, so we ended up having Erza explain the fact that they were basically requests the guild would offer to specific adventurers.

Designated requests tended to be of high importance and taking on one went hand in hand with receiving every last bit of support the guild was capable of providing. Hence, messing with an adventurer working on a designated request was more or less equivalent with messing with the guild itself. That, by extension, meant that Fran would effectively remain under the guild's protection so long as she was on a designated request.

There kinda wasn't anyone brave enough to pick a fight with guild, seeing as it not only spanned what was basically the entire world, but also helped maintain the populace's everyday lives. The sheer amount of influence the guild held would then make it possible for it to function like a shield that'd stop Fran from being put under the influence of the Beast King's authority.

"I don't really think you can just kinda give out designated requests all willy nilly though, can you?"

"I've already got that covered. All I have to do is give her a designated request associated with the dungeon. I'm basically the only person the Dungeon Master is

willing to negotiate with, so I can just say she's helping me look for something the Dungeon Master wants."

"Ohhh~ So that's why you want to get her promoted. Mhmm, I get it now. It's because designated requests can only be given to adventurers that are at least C ranked."

"Exactly."

Huh, I guess that means he really was just doing everything he was doing for Fran's sake this whole time. I had to say, it really was hard for us to believe him because of how shady he was. In fact, I probably still wouldn't believe him if I hadn't the Principality of Falsehood.

"Why didn't you just tell her everything from the start?"

"I was worried she'd take an interest in the Beast Lord if she learned the truth."

Well uh, can't say he's wrong, seeing as she kinda did exactly that.

"And that, Fran, is why I'm asking you to raise your rank as soon as possible."

"Nn. Got it."

"Try your best to get it done before the Martial Arts Tournament. As I said earlier, I'll get you a recommendation, so you at least won't have to worry about that."

"Don't need recommendation."

"Really? Why's that? It'll get you seeded so you can skip the prelims, you know?"

"Want to participate in prelims."

"But Fran, the prelims are completely random. You might end up having to fight someone really strong."

"Don't care."

To Fran, the Martial Arts Tournament was effectively an event in which she'd have a chance to fight a bunch of people.

“T-That’s fine. I can make it so you get registered like any other person and can take part in the prelims.”

“You sure do like fighting, Fran. Ermagawd, that part of you is just so adorable~”

It seemed like Dias was willing to comply with our request as he deemed it dangerous for Fran to meet the Beast Lord. He was all for having us hole ourselves up in the dungeon so we could rank ourselves up while also avoiding the worst possible scenario. I got that and all, but I still couldn’t help but feel that he was acting suspiciously.

“Why going so far?”

Fran’s question hit the nail on the head and got to the exact thing that resulted in me feeling all suspicious. I understood that Dias, as Guildmaster, was obligated to protect the adventurers that worked under him. Still, I failed to see why he would go this far for us.

“I’ve got my reasons. For now, let’s just say it’s to fulfill a promise I happened to make with a certain someone.”

Oh. I get it now. It must’ve been because of that contrat Rumina asked him to fulfill. Its contents probably mentioned touched on having dias do his best to help any Black Catkin he happened across. This was further evidenced by his lack of ability to name her seeing as how Erza was still present.

“Do thank her next time you two meet.”

“Nn. Got it.”

“What’s this? You two have got some sort of secret going? I’m soooo jealous.”

Well, we kinda are heading back to the dungeon anyways, so we might as well do that while we’re at it. She really has made life a lot more convenient for us, after all.

Chapter 172

The Black Cat

The Disaster Pillbug's corpse was kinda a bit too big to fit in the Guildmaster's room, so we dumped it in the dismantling room together with all our other non-quest related materials. This action also served a second purpose. One of the guild's clerks would be helping us evaluate its worth.

I was a bit worried as to whether or not we'd actually be able to sell it seeing as how it wasn't dismantled, but I soon recalled that the guild did actually offer a dismantling service, albeit at a bit of a price.

According to Erza, the fee for said service wasn't fixed. It could vary based on how large and difficult to dismantle the magic beast in question happened to be.

"Hmmm... I don't think it'll cost you any more than 40k Golde. I think they only charged The Hundred Blade about 40k-50k for the B ranked Lesser Dragon he brought in that one time. Do you know about him? Hundred Blade Forrund, I mean."

"Nn. Met in Barbra."

"Wow! I'm so jealous! He's soooo cool! I just can't help but look up to him. Don't you think so too, Fran?"

"Nn. Very strong. Will become that strong too someday."

"That's not what I mean! Come on Fran, don't you think he's really hot and dreamy? He's just my type."

Erza started doing the usual thing and twisting his body back and forth whilst wearing an expression you probably wouldn't expect to see on anything other than a maiden in love. Honestly, at this point, I'd already gotten so used to him that he actually started kind of looking like a girl. Kinda.

"Nn?"

“Oh, how I’d love for him to embrace me with his thick burly arms while whispering words of love.”

Welp. Sure sucks to be Forrund right now. I actually just flat out feel sorry for him. You know, this is probably the first time I’ve ever felt any sympathy for any sort of super good looking guy. I guess being attractive isn’t without its detriments after all.

Erza’s words were explicit, but Fran didn’t really seem to catch his drift regardless.

[I guess you might as well just nod along for now.]

“Nn.”

“Oh, you see where I’m coming from, Fran?”

“Nn.”

“He sure is hot, isn’t he?”

“Nn.”

“It looks like we might just have similar tastes in men.”

“Nn.”

Fran casually nodded along and affirmed Erza’s statements as brought out the materials she wanted to sell.

The staff member responsible for appraising the items Fran was selling had a look on his face that almost made it seem as if he’d completely lost all faith in humanity. He simply had nothing to say, and didn’t know how to feel. On his left was a homo wriggling his body back and forth as he acted like a girl in love. On his right was a small child diligently sorting a whole slew of materials without even the slightest change in expression.

“Take pillbug out here too?”

“Huh? What? O-Oh, yeah, sure.”

“Nn.”

Fran dumped the Disaster Pillbug’s corpse onto the floor. It had yet to be dismantled, so it was in the exact same state it’d been in right after its death. The room was immediately filled with a putrid stench as a result. It was one born from a mix of the creature’s electric burns and the simple unpleasant odor its body’s fluids happened to give off. Speaking of which, said fluid had yet to stop dripping out from within the insect’s open wounds.

Insect-type magic beasts had the tendency to be much more grotesque than their beast-like counterparts, and this one in particular was especially so as a result of its massive size. In fact, it was so much more disgusting than usual that even the clerk in charge of dismantling ended up grimacing in response.

Despite that though, the clerk ended up approaching it. Wow. I really had to give it to him. Dude was one hell of a professional.

He, however, was pretty much the only man present capable of really keeping his cool. A certain other person happened to freak the hell out.

“Gyaaah!”

“Erza?”

“Eeeeeeeeeekkkkkk!”

The sudden throaty scream had sounded so panicked that I’d almost thought something serious had happened.

“Something wrong?”

“T-There’s a bug!”

“Nn. Pillbug.”

“H-Hiiiiii!!”

Erza’s face paled as he clasped both hands to his chest and started trembling in terror.

His legs were shaking in much the same manner as those of a newly born deer.

The immediate conclusion I made was that Erza just wasn't a bug person. He didn't seem capable of handling them, and that was that. The pillbug's ridiculous size didn't really help his case either. In fact, it probably was doing the exact opposite.

The specific emotion reflected in his eyes wasn't disgust, but rather terror. God, is he actually supposed to be some sort of pure maiden? Er, I guess he does have a heart like one, sooooo...

"Nn? Erza?"

"Aaahhh..."

Fran, on the other hand, didn't actually seem to have a particular disdain for any sort of creature whatsoever. She stared at Erza with a confused look on her face; she seemed not to have even the slightest bit of an understanding of the other party's fear of bugs.

Erza's screams started escalating in volume in the meantime, and his face had begun warping to an even greater degree. That said though, his was no longer the face that contained in it the most fear. The clerk had gotten extremely pale for some odd reason, but spoke in as comforting a tone as he could manage regardless.

"P-Please calm down Erza! That isn't a bug!"

"I-It totally is!"

"It just happens to resemble one. That's it!"

"I don't believe you! It has to be a bug!"

"J-Just think about it for a second. T-There's no way a bug that big could actually exist."

"Big bug...? Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!"

"Aw shit!"

"Uguguguguguuuu!!!"

“Craap! Hey, you! Can you move that thing somewhere else? Like right now? Please?”

[Shove it in storage for now. I’m pretty sure the whole situation will spiral out of control if you don’t.]

“Nn!”

Fran still didn’t understand exactly what had happened, but she abided by the man’s request and immediately shoved the pillbug into storage as she had at least got the fact that something was wrong given that Erza had started tensing up.

“Everything’s okay Erza! It’s not here anymore!”

“W-Where’d the bug go...?”

“Gone.”

“M-Mkay...”

The tension that’d filled the air around Erza dispersed as he fell flat on his butt. Seeing said action caused the clerk in charge of dismantling to breathe a sigh of relief.

“W-Whew. Thanks.”

“What happened to Erza?”

“Well, you see, Erza isn’t exactly comfortable around anything that resembles an insect. She gets so terrified of them that they make her go berserk. The rampage that ensues tends to produce some pretty terrible results, as she’s still capable of using her skills quite masterfully even when not fully conscious.”

“Any problems in dungeons?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

Erza was still just as capable of making use of his abilities when in his berserked state, so he wouldn’t die or anything, but that didn’t mean he was problem free. Not being in control meant that he would not only cause damage through friendly fire, but also

completely obliterate any monster-related materials and hence reduce his party's income.

He could tolerate smaller bugs, but he was known to go crazy if he got surrounded. There'd also been a case in which he went on a rampage after having a cockroach lunge straight at his face.

"One of his incidents had even lead to him sending about 20 of the guild's clerks to the infirmary."

"Sounds like dangerous event."

"That's cause that's exactly what it is. Her rampages are so crazy and sudden that even A-rank adventurers find themselves having a fair bit of trouble dealing with them."

The sudden appearance of a gigantic bug had pretty much put him on the verge of having one of his so called incidents.

"Erza, okay?"

"I'm sorry Fran... I just can't stand bugs!"

I wanted to ask him the reason for his fears, but refrained because I figured there was a chance that recalling the memory would make him lose it. It looked like just casually pretending nothing ever happened would probably be in our best interest for now.

"Erza, leave room."

"I'll do exactly that. Check in with me once you're done, I'll go have some tea."

With Erza's departure came a wave of silence; we finally found ourselves capable of selling our materials.

The pillbug sold for a total of 560k Golde. It was considered fairly difficult to dismantle, and thus, cost us about 30k, which meant we made an overall profit of 530k. The fact that it was worth way more than a high ogre's hide, which averaged in at about 40k a piece, really served to provide a sense of scale and show off just how ridiculously large the Disaster Pillbug really was.

All in all, we'd made a total of 800k Golde since departing Barbra.

I wasn't really sure how we should feel. It felt like we were earning ourselves a bunch of money really easily, but it also kind of felt like we'd kind of put our lives on the line at the same time, so I couldn't really tell if it was worth it. Oh well, whatever works, I guess.



"Are you all done now, Fran?"

We found Erza doing exactly what he said he'd be doing after we finished selling everything. He was sitting at the guild's bar, drinking a cup of tea together with an old man. The teapot he was using seemed rather stylish, whereas the cup was adored with a bit of a floral design. The tea was accompanied by a snack consisting of scones. The hell? Are we in a goddamn cafe or something?

"Done."

"Would you like some too?"

"Okay."

"I have red tea, black tea, and ulm tea. Which would you like?"

"That many choices?"

"Mhmm. I recommend scones for the red tea, cookies for the black tea, and pie for the ulm tea. "

"...Will have all."

"Oh my. Can you really eat that much?"

"Can."

"Alright then. You heard the girl."

"Sure did."

The bartender had an old gentlemanly look to him. He didn't fit in with his rowdy surroundings. Fran seemed to feel the same way, as she had her head tilted in confusion.

"This place. Bar?"

"Mhmm."

"Hahaha. I get that quite often. I can assure you that it is. However, I've started to stock a wider variety of tea and snacks at Erza's request."

"Teehee. That'd be because the tea you make is always really delicious, which is also why I tend to punish everyone that troubles you just a teensy bit more than I normally would. Doing so teaches them just how great tea can be too. I think it's become just about as popular as the alcoholic drinks you serve, right?"

"That's in part due to the rumours about how much you and the Guildmaster hate drinking. A fair number of our clients tend to pick tea over alcohol if either of the two of you are present."

I guess it does only make sense for people to have an aversion to the stuff if the guild's two most influential figures have a dislike for it. In that sense, I guess you could say that Erza, like Dias, was abusing his power to do whatever he wanted. Er, actually I guess that's not quite right. It's more like he's throwing around the influence brought about by people's fear of and respect for him.

"Here's your first cup of tea, and a few snacks. I've started you off with the red tea."

"Nn."

Fran took a scone in each hand and devoured the entire plate's worth in an instant. I'm not even actually sure when it happened, but, she also somehow managed to down a tonne of cream and jam as well.

Erza enjoyed his team in a much more elegant manner as he watched over Fran with a smile. His hands were posed exactly as they should've been; his pinky was sticking up and out. The sheer refinement of his mannerisms almost seemed to serve as a testament to the fact that he was really girly.

I was a bit worried about as to whether or not the old man sitting across from us would think poorly of Fran as a result of her poor mannerisms, but that fortunately didn't end up being the case. He was instead gazing at her endearingly, as he likely would his own grandchild.

If I was to judge his occupation purely off his attire, I'd probably assume him to be some sort of adventurer.

"Fuofuofuo. The healthiest children are the ones with healthiest appetites..."

"Who?"

"Oh, excuse me, I must've forgotten to introduce myself. My name is Radyer, a mere C ranked adventurer."

"He's known for being Ulmutt's oldest adventurer."

The fact that he was a white haired magician instantly made me assume that he was someone really strong. I was basically completely convinced that his rank was lower than it should've been despite the vast extent of his experience because his body had gotten old and frail. I was also more or less sure of the fact that he used his wisdom and knowledge to compensate for his weaknesses.

"He's actually realllly strong. He'd be a B ranker if not for the sheer amount of time he spent as a court magician."

"I'm fairly disheartened by the fact that you didn't claim me to be on par with an A ranker instead."

"Well, that'd be because A ranked adventurers are far out of the norm."

"That aside, Black Catkin adventurers sure are quite rare, aren't they?"

Radyer's evaluating gaze seemed to carry with it a hint of nostalgia.

"It's been about fifty years since I've last seen one, hasn't it?"

"Hmmm? Fran isn't the only Black Catkin adventurer around, you know? We've got

quite the number of them. In fact, they make up many of our new recruits.”

“If you’re talking in technical terms and including all Black Catkin that are adventurers, then yes. But, there aren’t any others this young or capable.”

“Well, I guess that is true. So you’re saying that there was another Black Catkin like Fran about fifty years ago?”

“There was. The lass here is nearly identical to the one I met back then. They’ve the same black hair and the same curt manner of speech. I can’t recall her name, but I can still vividly recall the sharpness of her gaze.”

Radyer closed his eyes and stroked his beard in order to better recall his distant memories.

“I think she said she was 15. I also recall that she liked to solo, and would treat those that insulted her tribe without even the slightest shred of mercy. She would also attack Blue Catkin adventurers and violently perform acts of retribution. I believe she would cut off their tails as if it was nobody’s business.”

“She really does sound just like Fran.”

“Doesn’t she? I believe she used to be called The Black Cat. There used to be a rumour that said any that involved themselves with The Black Cat would but lose their lives.”

“That person, where now?”

“I have no idea. She just suddenly vanished one day. I’ve no idea as to whether she died, or simply happened to leave town.”

“Oh...”

If she was really that strong, then she, like Fran, had probably been seeking evolution. If this all happened 50 years ago, then there’s actually a chance she’s still alive. I’d like for us to talk to her and have her tell us everything she’s learned. I’m also a bit curious about the part where she just upped and vanished.

“The reason I don’t know is because The Black Cat and I weren’t what one could call intimate. Aurel, one of my old party members, however, might.”

“That sounds just perfect. The two of us were planning to go see Grandpa Aurel soon anyway. Why do you think he’d know though?”

“There are quite a few reasons. The first is because they’re both beastkin, and the second is because I happened to see them speaking with one another on multiple occasions. The third would likely be because she had apparently saved him once in the past. He warned us not to ever mess with her thereafter. It was a fair warning. I may very well have hit on her given her appearance and how I was in the past.”

“Was The Black Cat really cute?”

“She was. Just between you and me, I’m almost certain that Aurel had fallen for her.”

“Kyaaaah!! Wait, does that mean Gramps is a lolicon?”

“No, no, definitely not. He was still in his teens back then. It was way back when he was still known as a genius as a result of the fact that he’d broke the record for being the fastest adventurer to become a D ranker.”

Right. For some odd reason, I’d almost been under the impression that Dias, Aurel and Radyer had just always been old men. I almost forgot that they too had, at one point, been young. You know, to be honest, I can’t even actually imagine them being young. Oh well, either way, I guess we’ve got one more reason to go hit Aurel up now.

Chapter 173

Maintenance

We decided to stop by that one dwarven blacksmith's shop before heading over to Aurel's manor.

"Oh, hey. It's that little missy Gallus told me to take care of. You need something?"

"Want equipment repaired."

We hadn't really bothered getting the Black Cat Set repaired up 'till now 'cause its self-repair function made it so we'd never really needed it. We technically didn't need it now either, but the pillbug had damaged the equips so badly that they had still yet to fully fix themselves. We'd also kind of never bothered maintaining the armour in any which way either, and figured we might as well.

The Martial Arts Tournament was coming up, so it'd probably be a good idea for us to have our gear in top shape.

"Sure thing! I, Zerld, will fix it right up. They don't call me Ulmutt's best blacksmith for nothing."

Zerld procured a magic crystal and started setting up a magic circle after spending a bit of time inspecting Fran's gear. Most of the work seemed rather front loaded, as he instantly fixed it by casting Repair immediately after getting everything ready.

The 100k Golde price tag he slapped onto the service was pretty worth; all Fran's stuff was back in peak condition.

"That's that. Hand me your sword next."

"Nn?"

"Well, I just thought your sword might be in tatters given how damaged your self-repairing armour was."

Oh, right. I guess that would normally be how things go, huh? In my case, all the damage I take gets nullified over time by my Self-Repair and Regeneration skills.

“Here.”

[I-I’m perfectly okay. I don’t need any repairs.]

I thought I was fine, but Fran took me off her back and handed me over to Zerld despite my protests.

(But better to have skilled blacksmith check just in case.)

It seemed that Zerld’s words ended up making Fran feel a bit anxious. She herself wasn’t really all that skilled at discerning my condition, and would normally have no choice but to just believe what I told her.

[Oh well. Whatever works, I guess.]

You know what, it might actually not be a bad idea to get a checkup every once in a while. There was always the possibility that there was something off about me, and I just didn’t notice it.

“Hmmm, this sword is made of quite the metal.”

Zerld looked at me from a bunch of different angles before placing me on top of a table and tapping me a few times with a small hammer.

He continued hitting me with the hammer, and sent vibrations through my blade at regular intervals. It was a sensation I honestly couldn’t bring myself to dislike. I could feel the seriousness and earnestly of the dwarven craftsman’s actions, and it was actually honestly quite a comfortable sensation.

He then put me inside a box full of water and shake it lightly before finally polishing me off with a nice clean cloth.

Wew, that felt great. I only barely managed to refrain from letting out a sigh because of how good it felt. The reason I managed to hold back wasn’t something as mundane as wanting to keep my identity from Zerld. It was instead because I didn’t want to

moan in response to getting my blade stroked by another man. I'd rather kill myself.

Fortunately, I was capable of holding onto my will to live because the pleasure I felt wasn't sexual in any which way. It was instead more akin to what you'd feel when getting a massage. I guess one could say it didn't really matter which it was, but the part of me that was a middle aged man insisted otherwise.

I'm not quite sure how it happened, but, Fran somehow managed to catch onto the fact that I was internally gritting my teeth and holding myself back.

(Master, something wrong?)

[N-Nah, nothing's wrong.]

(Acting... weird.)

I decided to explain myself to Fran after realizing that I'd worried her for a reason I couldn't really call anything but ridiculous.

Still, I really had to admit that this felt hella good. Fran always wiped me off as well so I wouldn't get all dirty and stuff, but she never managed to make it feel *this* good.

If I had to guess, I'd say that the difference in the sensation stemmed from a difference in skill levels. Reason being that the difference between Zerld's touch felt like that of a real blacksmith, whereas Fran's felt like that of an amateur.

"And that's that. Your blade wasn't bent or scratched at all, so I just gave it a good old polish."

Man, that was one helluva polish. Shit was relaxing as hell. I felt like I'd just gone to a super high end bath house, soaked in the water for half a day before getting a massage and sleeping all night. It was like I was totally exhilarated and rejuvenated all at once.

I'd already been in perfect condition to begin with, so that massage had only pushed me further beyond. It felt like I was in absolute peak form and ready to give it my 120%. That said, my stats hadn't changed at all, so I guess it was more of a mood thing than anything else. I did feel like the internal flow of my magical energy had improved, and that it was a bit easier than usual for me to use skills and whatnot, but I wasn't sure if that was actually a thing or just some sort of placebo.

“Nn. Blacksmith amazing.”

“Gahahaha. Where’d that come from?”

Fran spoke in a tone filled with admiration as she looked at how shiny my blade had become. You know, I really did feel better than usual. It’d probably be a good idea to do this more often, and not because it felt good!

...

Okay, well, maybe because it felt good, but you know what? Me being in good shape also means me being able to do more for Fran.

“Later.”

“Sure thing. I’ll do all the maintenance you need, especially seeing as how the tourney’s coming up.”



Not a lot of time had passed despite the fact that a bunch of different things had happened. It was still rather early, so we moved towards Aurel’s manor at a rather leisurely pace.

In fact, Fran had started buying random stuff and just eating it as she slowly walked towards the hill on top of which the mansion was situated.

[These stalls sure are selling a tonne of magic beast meat. I guess that’s just how life goes when you live in a city with two dungeons inside of it.]

Magic beast meat was treated as a luxury good back in Barbra, but here, it was literally all over the place. It was being treated like... well... regular meat.

“Nn. Tasty.”

“Woof.”

Apparently many of magic beasts one could find in dungeons meant for newbies were

actually edible. I couldn't help but wonder, was that just how it was? Or was it only because of the deals made with the city's dungeon masters?

Fran and Urushi pretty much picked up food from every single street stall they came across. I'd been expecting them to do the usual thing in which they buy an armful of stuff, but they didn't actually do that this time around. Instead, they instantly consumed everything they bought.

It didn't take long for us to pass through the residential district and lay eyes on Aurel's mansion.

[Seems like there's a lot of people around there.]

"Nn. Lots."

"Woof."

It looked like 10 odd people were crowded around the manor's front gate.

Chapter 174

Blue Pride

A group of what seemed to be adventurers had gathered in front of Aurel's manor. I didn't know exactly who they were or why they were here in the first place, but, I could at least tell that they were only barely organised. They kind of resembled the hoodlums one would normally find loitering around in front of a convenience store. The only two members of the group that looked to have even the slightest bit of decency were the ones I presumed to be their leaders. There was a male and a female, with the latter looking to be around 17 or 18 years old.

I didn't really get what they were doing; the two were standing right in front of the guards with their arms crossed. It kind of looked like they were waiting on something, but I couldn't really say for sure as to whether or not that was the case.

Looking a bit closer allowed me to realize that the female was some sort of catkin. The same applied to the rest of the group's members as well.

(Mmph.)

[What's wrong, Fran?]

(All Blue Catkin.)

[Wait, really? All of them?]

(Nn.)

[I guess we'd best be on guard then,]

(Woof!)

I didn't think that they'd just attack us out of the blue, but hey, better safe than sorry.

Getting through the gate looked to be a huge pain, but I still figured it'd be fine. Aurel

was apparently supposed to be really influential amongst beastkin, so I didn't think we'd have to worry about them trying to pushing through the gate even if the guards did let us in.

[Let's just ignore them and keep a move on, regardless of what they say.]

(...Got it.)

I was a bit worried despite the fact that Fran had agreed to my suggestion because she had hesitated before replying. Oh well, whatever. I figured I could always just teleport us through the gate If worse came to worst. Aurel seemed to have taken a liking to Fran, so we probably wouldn't be treated as trespassers or intruders so long as we explained ourselves.

Fran briskly approached the gate whilst keeping her guard up. She made use of the Presence Isolation and Stealth skills in order to make herself as difficult to notice as possible.

The male Blue Catkin were rather weak, so we were able to stop ourselves from attracting their attention so long as we avoided any direct lines of sight.

That, however, was slated to change the moment we actually tried entering the property. We would have to speak with one of the gatekeepers in order to gain access, and doing that would expose us to the teenage girl and her companion.

Oh well. We could probably just ignore them or something.

"Hello."

"Huh? Oh, hello Fran. Feel free to enter."

"Allowed to?"

Wait, they let us in? I was expecting them to have to go speak with a few other people and double check stuff first. We'd only ever been here once, so I really wasn't counting on us being allowed in just like that.

"You are. Master Aurel told us to let you in and prioritize you over all else."

“The only other person we’ve ever been told to treat like that was Erza.”

Huh, I guess he took much more of a liking to Fran than I’d thought. Well, works for us, I guess.

“Nn. Will be entering then.”

“Please do.”

“Hey, what gives!?”

“Yeah, what the hell is the meaning of this!?”

“Nn?”

Both the male and female blue catkin standing by the gate raised their voices in protest as a result of the fact that Fran had easily been let inside.

The girl’s expression warped from one that seemed to be waiting for something while stumped to one that was more so resembled an antagonizing glare.

“How come she gets to go through like that? Why do we have to wait even though we went out of our way to visit so we could exchange greetings?”

“Do you have any idea how long we’ve been standing out here?”

“I’ve already told you that you can’t meet Master Aurel unless you’ve a prior appointment. You were the ones that insisted you wanted to see him no matter what.”

“Come on! We’re Blue Pride! Don’t you know how famous we are on the the Khrome Continent?”

“I’m our boss’ proxy. Making me wait is basically the same thing as making our boss wait!”

The way they were boasting made it sound like Blue Pride was supposed to be a famous group of mercenaries whose very name inspired fear, which, given that they were from a different continent, could very well be possible.

“I don’t care.”

However, their influence failed to extend past their area of origin. Here, their name seemed to be just like any other, as the gatekeeper just casually shook his head and denied the girl entry, which in turn caused the veins in her forehead to swell in anger. If I were to offer an opinion, I’d say that she was acting in an unbecoming manner. She ended up getting all mad because the gatekeeper had basically ignored her proclamation of how great she supposedly was. The emotional way in which she reacted was one that you really couldn’t call anything but lame.

“We are granting Fran access because she is one of our lord’s honoured guests.”

“Haaah? She’s just a black catkin, and a little girl at that.”

A moment of pondering led me to realize that the group’s name, Blue Pride, indicated that it was probably comprised solely of Blue Catkin, which in turn meant that it’d probably probably be best for us to stay as far away from them as possible.

My assumption was only supported by the way they looked at Fran. Their eyes were filled with contempt; it was obvious that they didn’t think highly of her.

“So you’re saying that this Black Catkin is more important than we are?”

“Just to be clear, her race has nothing to do with the fact that we’re letting her inside.”

“She is simply one of our master’s honoured guests. By extension, insulting her is no different from insulting our master.”

Aurel’s two gatekeepers spoke in turn, with one supporting the argument made by the other.

“What are you saying!? Can’t you see that she’s a Black Catkin!”

Man, you know, this is why I hate Blue Catkin. I couldn’t recall us ever meeting one that actually didn’t look down on Black Catkin. They all just seemed to believe that every single last member of the Black Cat Tribe was useless, and that Black Catkin only existed so they could be sold into slavery and whatnot. Moreover, none of the Blue Catkin we’d met thus far had seemed even the slightest bit opposed to the idea. It’d almost seemed like it was something that came to them naturally.

[Let's just ignore them and go.]

(...)

Aw, crap.

It didn't really show on her face, but Fran had her foot on the gas and was ready to slam the hell out of it. She'd probably hit the limit of her tolerance if they said another one or two things.

[Urushi, push Fran forwards!]

"Woof."

"Mmph..."

I pulled Fran forwards with Telekinesis whilst Urushi pushed her from behind; the two of us worked together in order to get her to move before she lost her temper. Unfortunately, our efforts didn't really amount to much, as Fran and the Blue Catkin girl glared at each other regardless.

[Come on, let's just get out of here.]

"Woof woof!"

"Nn."

Fran reluctantly agreed to move after Urushi and I made a few more desperate attempts.

Whew.

Starting a fight here and now wasn't exactly be what I'd call a good idea.

That, however, didn't mean that she was going to let them off for looking down on her and her kin. She turned around right as she made her way through the gate and activated the Coercion, Intimidation, and Domination skills all at once whilst also directing at the girl and the man standing beside her a powerful wave of bloodlust.

“Hiii!”

“Kuh...”

The girl’s face paled as fell flat on her butt, whereas the man ended up taking a few steps backwards. All their immediately ended up springing to their feet in surprise before sending their glares in Fran’s direction. Though they tried, they were unable to hide their fear of her.

As mercenaries, and hence, people experienced in the art of combat, they were able to recognize Fran’s overwhelming power.

“W-What...”

Fran calmly walked through the gate as she took note of the fact that the out of breath Blue Catkin girl behind her had muttered something in a lifeless tone.

[Look at you, all smug and stuff...]

“Heheh.”

[That wasn’t a compliment, you know?]

“Nn?”

Chapter 175

The Ten Original Tribes

“Hey, welcome.”

“Nn.”

The maid we met the first time we visited, Shara, led us through Aurel’s mansion and towards our destination, the dining room.

“Sorry it had to be here of all places. I was stuck in a meeting with a bigshot all day, so I haven’t really had a chance to eat anything yet.”

“Don’t mind.”

“Care to join me? My personal chef just happened to get back from Barbra last night. I’m sure his dishes will be able to catch your interest.”

Why the hell not? The fact that Aurel called the chef his personal one pretty much instantly convinced me that the person in question was incredibly skilled.

“Please.”

It looked like Fran shared the same sentiment, as she immediately consented to having another meal.

“Shara, make sure the chef makes enough for her as well.”

“Yes sir.”

It was only then that I finally realized the implication of Aurel’s statement. He was a pretty influential figure, but he was so busy that he hadn’t a chance to eat until the afternoon had come to pass. That could only mean that the person he’d been entertaining was even more influential than he was.

“Weird people outside.”

“Some sort of mercenary band, I hear.”

“Famous?”

“Well, it’s not a group I’ve ever heard of, at least. My guess is they want to talk to me so they can boost their prestige.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s something that happens all the time. People love to make claims about how well known they are elsewhere. They’ll boast about slaying powerful demons and knowing influential nobles.”

Oh, I get it. So everyone new in town is just desperate to leave an impression on all of Ulmutt’s more important people.

“Aren’t’t they aware that I can tell how strong they are just by looking at them?”

“Blue Catkin mercs, all weaklings.”

“Gahahaha! That so? If so, then there’s only be two possible ways for them to truly be well known. The first would be because one of their members happens to be incredibly strong. The second would be because they were cruel.”

“Nn.”

“To be honest, I didn’t like their attitudes. Their leader had sent a representative instead of coming on his own. At first, I’d almost wondered if said leader was a noble instead. Either way, I ended up deciding to just leave them be. I was hoping they’d eventually give up and go home.”

Huh, so they really were just scrubs after all. I guess that makes sense given that they seemed rather weak.

“Aurel. This.”

“Hmmm... I see, I take it you’ve completed my request then?”

Aurel opened the pendant and confirmed that we'd delivered the letter he wrote.

"Want to ask about evolution."

"Well, it does look like you did as you were asked and got the pendant to Rumina."

"Nn."

"I guess that must mean I'll have to pay my dues."

"Won't need payment if told about evolution."

"I'm not capable of providing you enough knowledge to have made the request I gave you worth your time."

"Really?"

"I wouldn't have sent you to see Rumina if I was capable of telling you what you wanted to know. I simply would have told you it myself. I myself have spent many years looking into the the Black Cat Tribe and its potential for evolution, but I've never been able to find satisfactory results. All I know is one has to do more than just reach a certain level."

Damn... Not even Aurel's figured anything out after spending several years researching the topic despite the fact that he's an influential B ranked adventurer...?

"Then would like to ask about the Black Catkin in the past."

"...Where'd you catch wind of that?"

"Radyr."

"That loose-lipped son of a...!"

"Was told about incredible strength."

"Yeah... She was quite the strong one..."

Aurel began speaking in a quieter tone as he recalled his youth. He told us about the Black Catkin he met, how she saved him, and how the two of them had hit it off.

“It’s already been 53 years since then.”

“That person. Couldn’t evolve?”

“She couldn’t. She, like you, had been out on a journey in search of a way to evolve. She’d even visited Rumina fairly frequently in hopes of finding a clue.”

“But still failed?”

“I presume so.”

Wait, he presumed so? Did that mean he wasn’t certain?

Fran had also caught onto his lack of confidence, and tilted her head in response.

“A few things happened, and she ended up leaving town. We haven’t been in touch since then.”

“Few things?”

“A few things indeed. Anyways, that’s enough of that. There’s no point talking about someone that’s been long gone. You’d best try talking to Dias if you’d like to know more about her. The two of them got along quite well. Anyway, why don’t we get back on track?”

I didn’t even need to activate the Principle of Falsehood in order to know that he was still hiding something, but I figure out exactly what that thing happened to be.

If I had to guess, I’d probably assume it was because she’d died off in a dungeon somewhere. If that were the case, then Aurel would probably find it rather difficult to talk about her. He also probably thought that Fran would end up mourning her predecessor’s death as well. I figured that there was no point putting a damper on Aurel’s mood, and that we could probably get Dias to tell us everything we wanted to know, so we just went with the flow and allowed him to change the topic.

“I’m sure you already know this seeing as how you’ve spoken to Rumina, but it used

to be much less difficult for Black Catkin to attain evolution.”

“Nn.”

“That, however, has changed. It is exactly that change that leads us to our next question: why? Why did the circumstances change? I personally believe that the answer is that the change is most likely a result of divine retribution.”

“Divine retribution? Punished by Gods?”

“It’s something often applied to those that have committed grave sins or opposed the Gods. The most famous example would be what occurred on the continent of Goldishia.”

Oh right. I remember hearing about that. Trismegistus, Lord of the Dragonmen, made use of the Evil God’s power in order to create a magic beast. Said magic beast went berserk and basically fucked the whole continent. Trismegistus was punished by being forced to fight his creation for the all of eternity.

“I know that it’s something that happened far in the past, but I still find it strange that there’s so little information that links evolution to the Black Cat Tribe. It almost seems to be exactly like the method in which one manufactures magic beasts in the sense that all pertinent information is simply gone. It’s like the Gods have simply erased all records of it. I dare say that they have even gone as far as to fiddle with people’s memories.”

Well I mean, that does sound like something a God would be capable of.

“Some beastkin tribes practice the art of keeping their evolutionary methods a secret, but it’s relatively easy for one to discover the methodologies so long as they refer to books or other works of literature. It’s not like that with the Black Cat Tribe’s evolutionary methods. Only a few works remain at best. I’ve also tried asking the Elves, but none of them seem to remember it at all. In fact, they seem to have completely forgotten the fact that the Black Cat Tribe was even capable of evolution to begin with.”

Okay yeah, that does sound pretty damn unnatural. I wouldn’t really be surprised if the Gods had just tinkered with people’s heads and forced them to forget stuff. Again, that sounds like something they’d be capable of.

I ruminated on it for a bit, but none of that God stuff actually served for anything more than an afterthought. I was much more focused on one of the other things that Aurel had said, as it simply couldn't be ignored.

"Still some remaining literature?"

Fran had addressed the exact same point I'd caught onto. Aurel hadn't stated that there were no longer any works of literature containing details regarding the Black Cat Tribe's evolutions. He'd only said that *most* were no longer present.

"Truth be told, I did happen to find a single work that contained a few pertinent details."

"What kind?"

"Calm down. What I found was not something that addressed the matter directly."

Aurel smiled bitterly at the fact that Fran had gotten so excited that she ended up slamming the table while rising to her feet. Apparently the book he found wasn't one that'd addressed the topic directly, but only mentioned it in passing.

"Have you ever heard of The Ten Original Tribes?"

"Ten original tribes? No."

"The Ten Original Tribes refer to the first ten groups of beastkin that the God of Beasts and Insects had birthed into the world. Each is said to possess the power of a Divine Beast laying dormant within."

"Divine Beast? Cool sounding."

"Nine of the Ten Original Tribes have been known since ancient times: The Golden Flame Lionkin, The White Snow Wolfkin, The Yellow Dust Ratkin, The Purple Wind Elephantkin, The Orange Iron Foxkin, The Red Earth Horsekin, The Green Water Turtlekin, The Blue Life Snakekin, and The Cherry Blossom Cowkin. The tenth was, for some odd reason, unknown. For many years, its identity was thought of as one of the Beastkin's greatest mysteries..."

"Last is Black Catkin?"

“Possibly, yes. The work I happened to procure stated that the last tribe was the Black Heavenly Tigerkin, and it just so happens to be that Rumina is of the Black Tigerkin race.”

“Black Heavenly Tigerkin same as Black Tigerkin? Then, Aurel, White Wolfkin same as White Snow Wolfkin?”

“Not exactly. We, the White Dog Tribe’s members, are capable of evolving into White Snow Wolfkin as opposed to White Wolfkin if we happen to fulfill a certain set of conditions. I myself was only capable of becoming a White Wolfkin.”

According to Aurel, his species, the White Dogkin, descended from a line of White Snow Wolfkin. Hence, its members were also capable of becoming a White Snow Wolfkin so long as they were qualified to do so.

Through extrapolation, one could then assume that it was possible for Black Catkin to either evolve into Black Heavenly Tigerkin if they too met a certain set of conditions. Else, they do as Rumina did and simply evolve into Black Tigerkin instead.

As a tribe that descended from one of the ten, White Dogkin were and are to this day respected by their beastkin peers.

“And that is why I believe it to be odd for the beastkin to have simply forgotten about the Black Cat Tribe, which has likely also descended from one of The Original Ten Tribes.”

“Nn.”

Many tribes have performed investigations in order to determine which of the tribes was supposed to be the last of the ten, many of which ended in an assertion of the superiority of one’s own lineage. Naturally, most of these assertions were false. Had he not known of Rumina, Aurel would have disregarded the work that made mention of the Black Heavenly Tigerkin as one of these false claims. But he didn’t. His knowledge of her made it so he simply couldn’t. Instead, he’d been convinced that the work he came across spoke merely of the truth.

But that, again, begged a question. Why exactly had that one work been left behind if all the rest had been purged?

“And that is all I have come to know.”

Aurel’s face twisted in what could only be expressed as deep rooted frustration. He’d evidently thought at length about the topic, quite possibly because of the Black Catkin girl he’d known in the past.

“However, I do still have one thing to say. Divine retribution comes not without salvation. Even Trismegistus may one day be released from his curse if he simply defeats the magic beast he spawned. By that logic, the Black Cat Tribe must also be capable of the same. There must be a way for you and your kin to release yourselves from the fetters that bind you.”

“Nn.”

“But again, that is the extent of my knowledge. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to be of much use.”

“Not useless. Helped lots. Thank you.”

“You really think so?”

“Nn.”

“That’s quite comforting to hear.”

Fran’s words caused Aurel’s expression to blossom into a heartfelt smile.

Chapter 176

Having Curry in Ulmutt

Shara, the maid, brought Fran and Aurel their meals shortly after they finished discussing evolution. She was accompanied by a pudgy man, who I presumed to be the chef Aurel had mentioned earlier.

“I’m sorry about having kept you waiting.”

“No worries, Asuto. The dish you’ve prepared has quite the delicious smell to it.”

“It’s one I learned of during my time in Barbra.”

Asuto, the chef, lifted the pot’s lid and started to stir its insides with a ladle.

“Oh? I’m looking forward to giving it a try.”

“Don’t expect too much. I’m still in the process of tuning the recipe.”

“And you’re still serving it in spite of that?”

“I’m serving it to you because I know you’ve a very sharp sense of taste. I’d love for you to help me figure out what the dish is lacking. The version I tasted in Barbra was much more complete, and also the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted in my life.”

“Well, now I’m really looking forward to trying the dish.”

“This prototype is already quite delicious in and of itself, but it seems to be missing something, so I’d really appreciate your opinion on it.”

“Hah hah hah. I’ll give you as many opinions as you’d like so long as it means I get to enjoy delicious food.”

“I was also wondering whether or not it’d be best for me to make several of my regular dishes for the guest. Should I?”

“Well? What do you say?”

“Nn. Don’t need.”

“Then please do give me your opinions on the dish as well.”

“Leave to me.”

“Woof woof!”

Urushi simply couldn’t stand for missing out on a free meal, so he made sure to make his presence known.

Oh God damn it Urushi, stop drooling! We might have to pay for it if you mess it up!

“Some for Urushi too.”

“The taste might be a bit too strong for a dog.”

“Not problem. Urushi, Magic Beast.”

“Woof!”

“Oh, he’s your familiar? He seemed so friendly that I didn’t even realize. Alright then, I’ll get some ready for him too.”

Asuto scooped the pot’s contents, a thick, syrupy, brown liquid composed of potatoes and other vegetables, onto a plate of rice.

The dish the chef had created was one I’d seen before. Rather, it was one I had a vast amount of tucked away inside my dimensional storage. Hell, there was no way I wouldn’t recognize it. It was the dish I’d popularized back when we visited Barbra.

“Curry?”

“Wow, I’m surprised you knew. You hit the hammer right on the head, it’s the dish that took this year’s cooking contest by storm, curry.”

“Oh, right, you did say you were just in Barbra, right Fran?”

“Nn.”

“Then I take it you’ve had it before?”

“Nn.”

“Great! That’s just perfect.”

Yeah uh, it was more like she ate the stuff every single day, but apparently that didn’t matter, seeing as both she and Urushi were looking at it with their eyes sparkling regardless.

“Enjoy.”

“It looks a bit odd, but smells delicious.”

“Nom nom.”

“Worf worf. Bork bork.”

“That’s a good appetite the two of you have there.”

The chef complimented Fran and Urushi with a smile.

“Hmmm... The taste is... unusual, but really fuels the appetite!”

Curry seemed to suit Aurel’s palate. He’d initially started off eating at a rather slow pace, but soon began shoveling it into his mouth as quickly as he could.

“Seconds.”

“Woof.”

Fran and Urushi finished three plates each by the time Aurel finished his meal.

[Is it good?]

(Mediocre?)

She ended up eating five dishes despite not really being satisfied with the taste.

(Nn. Still tasty, but bad compared to Master's curry.)

"This is pretty good. What did you say it was called again?"

"It's called curry. Barbra's actually currently in the midst of a curry boom. Everyone's developing recipes for curry bread, curry pasta, and other things that make use of it. Dozens upon dozens of stores have also started putting it on their menus."

"Given its taste, I'm not surprised. You said this recipe still needed some work?"

"It does. It can't hold a candle to the original I had in Barbra."

"The original's that good?"

"Everyone there has been saying that it would've won had the cooking contest not been cancelled due to the incident."

"Nn! Guaranteed victory."

Fran nodded happily in order to assent to Asuto's statement.

We hadn't managed to win, but we'd still at least managed to get that one dude to acknowledge the dish, which in and of itself made me quite happy. Likewise, the fact that the recipe had started becoming more and more widespread did the same. It looked people were already starting to come up with decently interesting spin offs too, like curry pasta, for example.

"Well, you sure seemed to suddenly get all giddy. Why the change?"

"Master won."

"Master? Master who?"

"Oh, are you talking about the Master that everyone's been talking about? The Curry Master?"

Wait. Wait what? Did he just say what I thought he did? He was referring to me, right?

“Was your cooking Master the person that introduced curry to Barbra?”

“Not just cooking. Master for everything.”

“Magic and swordsmanship included?”

“Nn. Master capable of anything.”

“That’s one impressive Master you’ve got right there. Wait, didn’t you enter the city all on your own?”

“Nn. Master elusive like phantom.”

“Well, you’re just as skilled as any full fledged adventurer, so I can’t say I’d be surprised if you were going around without any supervision.”

“Huh? So you really are the Curry Master’s disciple?”

Okay, yeah, apparently I actually heard him right. God dammit! Why did I end up with such a stupid sounding nickname!?

[Hey Fran, you mind double checking that by the Curry Master, he means me?]

“Asuto. Curry Master, who?”

“Wasn’t he your Master?”

Aurel raised his brow; he was a bit confused.

“Oh, that may be because he doesn’t actually refer to himself as such. The person responsible for inventing curry remained anonymous, and otherwise went only by Master. That’s why people started calling him the Curry Master to begin with. I myself chose to follow the trend because a group of adventurers I am acquainted with calls him that, and because I only managed to get my hands on a recipe through my connections with said group.”

“Adventurers?”

“Yeah. They’re a party by the name of the Scarlet Maidens. Do you acquainted with them?”

“Nn. Acquaintances.”

Oh god damn it! It was them? Zzz... My bet’s on this all being Lydia’s fault.

“So, what did you think of the curry I made?”

“Nn. Okay.”

“I see...”

Asuto’s face clouded over; he immediately caught onto the fact that Fran hadn’t been complimenting him.

[Why don’t we give him a copy of the recipe?]

We owed Aurel, and we were probably going to be relying on him much more going forwards as well, so I figured we might as well do him a favour.

Fran told Asuto our curry rice recipe in exchange for his own. It turned out that some spices were rather hard to get in Ulmutt, so he’d been using different ones to fill in for the missing flavour.

I wasn’t able to actually try what he’d made, but I was at least able to imagine it to some extent by making use of the Cooking skill. That, in turn, made it possible for me to give him a bit of advice.

As a result, we were able to create a type of curry that varied greatly from the one we made in Barbra, an Ulmuttian original.

I couldn’t help but look forward to the possibility of curry spreading through Ulmutt as it had Barbra.



And so, an hour passed.

During said hour, Fran had asked Aurel about a few more things, most of which were with regards to the Beast Lord that Dias had told us about earlier in the day.

“And here’s what I owe you for finishing the request I gave you, as well as a bit of an added bonus as thanks for the recipe.”

“Don’t really need.”

“Please just accept it. You’d leave me feeling awkward if you didn’t.”

Aurel handed us a leather bag containing 300k Golde.

I didn’t really think we deserved it. He’d only given us the request so he could acquaint us with Rumina. Likewise, us giving him the recipe was just more or less our way of thanking him for what he’d told us, so I felt like we were still in his debt. That said, cash was cash, and he was kinda just giving it to us, so we decided to just accept it anyways.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Do stop by again.”

“Nn.”

Chapter 177

The Menace Known as the Beast Lord

Fran left Aurel's manor after receiving her award. The blue catkin that'd been gathered outside earlier were already nowhere to be seen. They'd likely already given up and gone home.

[Alright, what now?]

"Will talk to Dias."

[Good point. Let's go ask him about the Black Catkin he knew 53 years back, and get all our questions answered right away.]

"Nn."

And so, we went to the Adventurer's Guild. The act of visiting it, however, in no way guaranteed our ability to actually meet with Dias. He was known for going in and out of the building, so our only choice was to just check if and hope that he was present.

But we couldn't.

We were instead ended up immediately taking a stance the moment we tried to enter the guild. More accurately, we became unable to resist the urge to ready ourselves for combat.

[Woah!]

"Nn!"

"Growl!"

The reason for which was the sheer extent of the pressure that'd suddenly assaulted us. Said pressure didn't contain any bloodlust or even the slightest hint of aggression, but, we felt overwhelmed and intimidated regardless. That was just how strong its

source happened to be. We were the only people around, and hence, the only people on guard, but I was sure that any other adventurer would've reacted in the same manner.

I surveyed my surroundings, only to find what could only be described as a strange looking door. It was in the middle of the road and didn't have anything to support it. It was just there. I immediately interpreted it as something along the lines of a Dokodemo Door: a portal that could lead basically anywhere. Though, it was a bit different from the standard variant, seeing as how its appearance was that of a pair of super fancy double doors. The pressure's source was evidently whatever lay waiting for us on the door's other side.

I almost seemed to have jinxed it, as the door slowly began to open the moment I had that exact thought. In said moment, I managed to catch a quick glimpse of the furniture that lay beyond.

Okay, welp. I guess that must mean it really is a Dokodemo Door, huh?

"Right this way, Lord Rig."

"Sure."

A figure emerged from the door's other side. The man's frame was so massive that it put even Erza's to shame. He stood at almost two meters tall, and had pretty much built purely of muscle. The way his shimmering, yellow-gold hair was arranged to look like a lion's mane really seemed to match with the way his movements almost seemed to resemble those of a felines'.

I instantly appraised the man the moment I saw him.

General Information

Name: Rigdis Narasimha

Age: 38

Race Beastkin (Golden Flame Lionkin/Red Cat Tribe)

Job: Spearlord

Status Level: 71/99

HP: 1965

MP: 1081

STR: 1084

VIT: 840

AGI: 748

INT: 476

MGC: 587

DEX: 491

Skills

Sole Sense: Lv 8

Intimidation: MAX

Espionage: Lv 3

Super Herculean Strength: Lv 6

Flame Magic: Lv 7

Fire Magic: MAX

Mimicry: Lv 3

Confusion: Lv 8

Presence Detection: lv 8

Combat Qigong: Lv 7

Inner Qigong: Lv 8 ^[1]

Torture: lv 2

Herculean Strength: MAX

Claw/Fang Techniques: Lv 7

Claw/Fang Arts: Lv 7

Regeneration: Lv 8

Command: Lv 3

Raise Morale: Lv 6

Resistance to Abnormal Status Conditions: Lv 7

Limber: Lv 6

Blink: MAX

Blink Step: Lv 5

Resistance to Mental Abnormalities: Lv 5

Elemental Blade: MAX

Threaten: Lv 3

Dominating Aura: Lv 8 ^[2]

Roar: Lv 8

Magic Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Perception: Lv 4

Magical Barrier: Lv 8

Flame Invalidation

Vigour Mastery
Intermediate Boost to All Stats
Enhanced Spear Techniques
Enhanced Spear Arts
Enhanced Elemental Blade
Enhanced Body Hair
Hardened Body Hair
Demon Killer
Dragon Slayer
Sense of Balance
Predation
Magic Manipulation
Night Vision

Unique Skills

Spear God's Grace
Spear Lord's Arts ^[3]
Spear Lord's Techniques ^[3]

Extra Skills

God of Beasts and Insects' Grace

Innate Skills

Awakening
Golden Flame of Extinction
Spear Deification

Titles

Kingslayer
Parricidal
Usurper
Beast Lord
Loved by the God of Beasts and Insects
Spearlord
Dungeon Conqueror
Demon Killer
Dragon Slayer
Flame User
S Ranked Adventurer

Equipment

Flame Dragon Fang Greatspear

Flame Dragon Scale Armour

Magical Poison Lord Snake Garments

Gold Flame Lion's Mantle

Sacrificial Bracelet

Ring of Reason

Proof of Beast Lordship

Ohhhhhhhhhhhh shiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeeeeeetttttt! The fuck is with his stats!? The hell!? Why does he have over 1k strength!? Holy shit, dude makes Amanda and Dias look like fucking kittens.

He also had a tonne of skills we hadn't seen before, alongside an extra skill and several unique and innate skills.

All those, however, were basically completely overshadowed by the two titles he held: Beast Lord and S Ranked Adventurer. Wait, wait, did that mean that he was *the* Beast Lord? The one paying Ulmutt a courtesy visit? He isn't just some really strong adventurer crowned the Lord of the Beasts, right? I mean, he is an S ranked adventurer, so that is at least a possibility of some sort, right...?

I wanted to examine his skills in more detail, but stopped myself as I noticed someone follow him out the door.

"What's wrong, girl?"

We looked up to see yet another man with a massive frame. His muscles were massive; they bulged to such an extent that I almost wanted to say he'd be able to beat a stone golem in a punch out. Unlike the Beast Lord, he was a man I at least knew of, one of the Beast Lord's two guards. I recalled him being named something along the lines of Goldalfa.

Apparently he thought Fran had seemed rather suspicious, given how she was staring at the pair in silence.

Crap. The Beast Lord'll probably end up making note of us at this rate.

[Hey Fran, let's get the hell out of here while we still have the chance.]

(...)

I figured that we'd best get out of here, so I tried calling out to Fran, but she didn't respond.

[Fran? Hey Fran, you alright?]

(...)

She instead continued to just stand there with a pale look on her face.

(Too strong... Can't win...)

Fran had always been able to keep her cool, even in front of beastkin that'd evolved, like Aurel or Rumina. Sure, she respected them, but she was capable of handling herself. But now, she was completely frozen over in fear.

Though, I guess it was kind of fair. The Beast Lord was a Golden Flame Lion, a member of the original ten tribes Aurel had just told us about. We'd imagined the tribes' members to be strong, but never could we have even fathomed for them to be *this* strong. He was already intimidating enough as he usually was. I could totally seeing him instantly killing any weaker foes just by throwing his bloodlust at them.

Beastkin seemed more or less capable of intuiting how strong other beastkin were, so I didn't really think it'd be weird for someone like Fran to get like this in front of one as strong as the Beast Lord.

"Huh? Oh, hey, you girl. Aren't you a Black Catkin?"

Shit. The Beast Lord actually noticed us. Worse, he was looking at Fran as if he was trying to evaluate her.

"It's pretty rare to see a Black Catkin adventurer."

"Especially one with a decent amount of skill."

Goldalfa added to his lord's comment with a compliment.

"She doesn't look skilled to me."

"That is just because your standards are far too high, Lord Rig."

"That so? Oh well, I can't say I'm not curious, so I guess I'll bite and show her a bit of *affection*."

Tsk. Fran had caught his eye, and not in a good way.

The manner in which he looked at her was akin to that of a lion that'd found itself some prey; his gaze was full of fighting spirit.

Fran, on the other hand, was still completely frozen. The fact that she was in the beast lord's presence had already caused her to completely break down.

(No... Will be killed...)

(Whimper...)

Urushi was the same, despite the fact that he was still hidden away in the shadows.

I considered teleporting us out, but realized that it was possible that running away like that would just bring us even more trouble further down the road. In other words, warping was nothing but a last resort. Neither option was really much better than the other, so I decided to just prioritize Fran's will and go with what she wanted.

Or at least that's what I would have done had I needed to.

"I am sorry Lord Rig, but I do not think you have the time for it."

"Ugh, come on, Royce."

A third person emerged from the door and called out to the Beast Lord. He too was someone I remembered, the carriage's second guard.

The door almost seemed to melt away the moment he touched it. It was probably something he'd created with one of his abilities to begin with.

“We’re already late for the meeting we scheduled with the Guildmaster. We really need to hurry it up.”

“Mannnn, I guess it can’t be helped. Be grateful, girl. It looks like you’ll get to keep your life, for now at least.”

“Lord Rig, the line you just said made you appear like a gangster.”

Goldalfa offered Rigdis some advice on his lack of etiquette, but was immediately shot down.

“There ain’t much of a difference between a noble society and a mafia anyways.”

“I would very much beg to differ.”

Again, Goldalfa offered a correct, and again, his opinion was ignored.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, shut up already. Let’s just hurry the hell up and get a move on.”

Whew. Thankfully, it looked like Rigdis ended up losing his interest in Fran, as he ended up going further into the guild whilst speaking with his bodyguards.

Fran collapsed onto her hands and knees the moment he vanished from her line of sight.

She was gasping desperately for air with all four of her limbs on the ground and sweat profusely dripping from her body, a miserable state.

[Hey, you still doing okay?]

“Nn...”

Yeah no. There was no way she was, but she nodded in a show of assent regardless. Well, at least she’d finally regained the ability to respond to me.

[Let’s just get out of here, go back to the inn, and get ourselves rested up. We can head back into the dungeon first thing tomorrow morning and put off talking to Dias till some time later, alright?]

“Nn.”

I teleported us near the inn after helping Fran up with telekinesis. I knew it was flashy, and that people might see us, but I figured it would be best for us to have her get some rest right away, teleporting was still less conspicuous than having her walk through town in her current state.

[Can you still walk?]

“Still fine...”

She only barely managed to drag her feet along as she walked. She was clearly even more drained than she would be after a fierce battle.

[Man, the Beast Lord sure did live up to his name. Dude was a total monster. Let’s try making sure we’re C rankers by the next time we run into him.]

[1] Seems as good a time as any for me to explain the difference between the two types of Qigong. In Japan, Qigong is described as “Hard” and “Soft,” which I translated as “Combat” and “Inner” respectively. Combat Qigong is effectively the same thing as martial arts. You use it to punch people. Inner Qigong is what relates to the healing other people with your qi (ki) stuff and whatnot. Note that these are derived from Chinese meanings, and, funnily enough differ greatly from their roots due to some sort of ancient localization error. China doesn’t actually have the “hard qigong” or “soft qigong” terms. They do have the hard/soft strength concept, but it’s applied quite differently. The hard concept is when one strengthens one’s own body. The soft concept is when one makes one’s own body more flexible. Both can be applied in a combat sense; the first is related to brute force or head on strikes, whereas the second is more closely related to receiving another individual’s blow and returning with a counter, preferably one that uses the attacker’s strength against them. Do keep in mind that Qi (Ki) is still related to the concept of healing, and good fighters are commonly also people with great control over their ki, and therefore capable of healing others. It’s quite difficult to explain this in detail without like 5k words, so I’ll just leave it at this for now.

[2] One piece reference. I was going to localize it the same way they localized it in one

piece, but the I found out that the lazy fucks didn't... which I guess makes sense because they have to worry about lip sync, but still. Gdi, I wanted to slack off and not think.

[3] This is higher tier than "Divine" because Japan says so. I was thinking of not literally translating it and instead going with "Transcendent," but I ultimately ended up just saying fuck it. I remember someone warning me about this, but I didn't want to think of something to replace "Divine X Arts" at the time. I still don't. Now, if the series was finished and I already knew all the tiers, then I'd actually bother, but it's too much of a pain when the author can still introduce higher tier shit going forward.

Chapter 178

Royce

We were currently back at the inn; 30 minutes had passed since we met the Beast Lord.

[Want to just call it a day?]

“Still okay.”

Fran, whose face finally had its colour restored to normal, shook her head. It seemed she'd fully recovered after staying away from the Beast Lord for long enough.

[You sure? Don't force yourself, alright?]

“Nn. Will go take bath.”

Fran liked baths, so having one for a change of pace sounded like a pretty good idea.

It would take her at least half hour to return. Normally, I would use the time she spent in the bath to practice using my skills, but today was going to be different. I happened to have a certain something else in mind.

[Hey Urushi, let's go appraise the Beast Lord and his companions.]

“Woof?”

[Let's go hang around the guild, appraise them the moment they leave it, and then run the hell away.]

“Ruff...”

[Don't sweat it, it's not like we're going to go pick a fight or anything.]

“Whimper...”

Urushi was scared of the Beast Lord, and therefore not exactly willing, but I insisted anyways because I wanted to know more about his abilities, especially seeing as it was possible for us to encounter a worst case scenario in which we ended up antagonizing them.

We needed to know if they had any skills that'd aid them in a pursuit. It'd be difficult to escape them if they did, but fairly easy otherwise. The former of these two possibilities implied that there was a chance we'd have to devise ourselves a few schemes ahead of time. There was also the fact that examining their skills in more detail would allow us to learn about what we might end up having in the future.

Things were looking pretty good so far. Goldalfa and the Beast Lord were both the more combat oriented types. Neither really had too many skills that'd help them in a chase or search. The ones they did have were rather high level, but still not enough for them to actually prevent us from escaping them. Hence, all our issues lay with the other guard and the coachman, both of which I'd missed the chance to appraise.

There was also always the possibility that the Beast Lord had a ninja-like covert ops division protecting him from the shadows.

[Don't worry. We won't need you to get really close to them or anything like that. In fact, it'd be better for us to stay rather far away.]

"...Woof."

[Let's try looking for them real quick. We'll just totally back out if they're not in the guild anymore, alright?]

"...Woof."

Urushi's fear of the Beast Lord made him reluctant to go with the plan I suggested.

Welp, just asking him didn't work. It looked like I had to try giving him the carrot.

Apparently, you weren't actually supposed to train dogs through a reward or merit based system, as it'd lead to them only doing things when also given treats. That said though, the same probably didn't apply to Urushi. I knew that I myself wasn't always exactly conscious of the it, but Urushi was in fact a Magic Beast, and not a dog.

[Well, how about this. I'll make you some super spicy curry after we get back. It'll be so spicy that not even Fran'll find it too hot to eat.]

"Growl...!"

Sweet. Looks like he's taken the bait.

[Alright! Let's do this!]



I situated myself on top of a roof that happened to have a good angle on the guild not too long after I finished negotiating with Urushi.

My wolf companion was hidden in a position a bit further distance away. It was safer for me to be alone. I was just a sword, so most people wouldn't notice me so long as I made sure to use Presence Isolation. It didn't even matter whether or not they happened to have Appraisal Detection, as they'd probably just think of me as a mysterious item that was capable of appraising things at most. Besides, it probably wouldn't even come to that. Appraisal Detection simply told its user that they were being appraised. It wouldn't be able to pinpoint me as the thing doing the appraising in the first place. Plus, they probably wouldn't be able to trace me back to Fran even if they did. Who in their right mind would suspect that the sword she was carrying around was the same as the one that'd appraised them?

That said, one could never be too careful, so I made sure to shrink my body down as much as possible whilst also changing its shape.

[Hmmm, should be good.]

The form I took was like that of an odd looking metal ball, and hence, functioned for more than enough of a disguise.

The reason I had Urushi accompany me is because I needed a pair of feet to get around town. I was a sword, so I kinda couldn't just randomly head out. I mean, I'd considered using a doppelganger, but, my doppelgangers' skills had their levels reduced, which in turn would make me more susceptible to being discovered. I figured stealth was more important than anything else at this point in time, so I chose that over the ability to

carry out the whole operation alone.

The Beast Lord's presence was a fairly obvious one, especially seeing as how he wasn't trying to hide his presence. Thanks to all that, I managed to sense him fairly easily even from outside the guild.

After thinking about it a bit, I realized that the Beast Lord hadn't actually seemed all that intimidating at all when he was riding the carriage earlier in the day. The discrepancy between the two states caused me to immediately question it. Had he been trying to hide his aura back then? Or was it the opposite? Did he just recently decide to start seeming all terrifying because he had to deal with Dias or something?

Welp, Dias seems kinda young and all, but he is still technically an old man. Hopefully the guy doesn't give a heart attack.

One of the only issues that I could really see with this whole plan of mine was the fact that I didn't know how long the meeting was going to last. Ideally, I wanted to get back before Fran finished with her bath, so we probably only had around another 15 minutes.

The other thing that could totally mess up my plans was the possibility of the Beast Lord's party choosing to leave Dias' room through the Dokodemo Door they used to port into the guild in the first place. I wouldn't even so much as have a chance to appraise them if they didn't leave through the Guild's front door.

Fortunately, I soon discovered that my worries were needless, as I sensed that they began moving, and more specifically, heading in the direction of the building's entrance.

[Alright, I've only got one shot at this. I'm going to have to get the hell out of here the moment I finish appraising them.]

It probably wouldn't be an issue if none of them had Appraisal Detection, but you know, just in case.

[There they are!]

The Beast Lord stood at the forefront. He was immediately followed by Goldalfa. The shorter guard we spotted earlier had taken up the rear. The coachman guy was

missing, so I decided to just appraise the third guy and call it a day for now.

[Fuck yeah! It worked! I'm out of here!]

I executed the escape plan I thought up just in case they happened to have skills that would allow them to chase me down. That is, I warped over to Urushi, grabbed him, and started spamming Long Jump in the inn's direction while also consciously hiding my presence. I figured I was probably going a bit overboard, but ended up carrying it through just in case. I chose the safest possible option because peeking at the Beast Lord's status had caused me to feel a bit nervous.

It turned out the last guard was just as ridiculously strong as I'd been expecting him to be.

General Information

Name: Royce

Age: 46

Race: Beastkin (Grey Rabbit Tribe/Silver Rabbitkin)

Job: Transporter

Status Level: 74/99

HP: 401

MP: 1199

STR: 151

VIT: 212

AGI: 419

INT: 401

MGC: 709

DEX: 127

Skills

Sole Sense: Lv 4

Digging: Lv 2

Espionage: Lv 2

Recovery Magic: Lv 8

Moonlight Magic: Lv 4

Presence Detection: Lv 7

Presence Isolation: Lv 4
Space/Time Magic: Lv 4
Kicking Techniques: Lv 4
Kicking Arts: Lv 4
Blink: Lv 4
Purification Magic: Lv 3
Resistance to Abnormal Status Conditions: Lv 4
Vibration Sense: Lv 3
Resistance to Mental Abnormalities: Lv 7
Staff Techniques: Lv 5
Staff Arts: Lv 6
Earth Magic: Lv 3
Leap: Lv 4
Soil Magic: MAX
Support Magic: Lv 5
Magic Resistance: Lv 8
Magic Detection: Lv 4
Magic Mastery
Orc Killer
Goblin Killer
Automatic MP Regeneration
Enhanced Hearing

Innate Skills

Awakening
Dimensional Gate
Crescent Moon's Crest

Titles

Orc Killer
Goblin Killer
He Who Protects
Dungeon Conqueror
Earth Mage
A Ranked Adventurer

Equipment

Silver Moonstone Staff
Crescent Moon Rabbit's Robe

Earth Spirit's Mantle
Bodyguard's Bracelet
Suction Magic Ring

It looked like the Dokodemo Door he had came from his job in the form of an innate skill, and was actually referred to as the Dimensional Gate skill.

Man, that was nerve racking.

[We're back~]

"Woof."

It seemed I messed up and ended up eating up a bit too much time, as Fran had gotten back before us.

I immediately recognized the state she was in as a bit abnormal. The lights were off, and she was on top of the bed with her face in her knees and her arms around them.

[Hey Fran, why are the lights off?]

"Nn...!"

Fran rushed towards us the moment we called out to her. She then wrapped her arms around Urushi and buried her face in his fur.

[Woah. What's up?]

"Woof?"

"Master... Urushi..."

[What's with you all of a sudden?]

"Nothing..."

Her words were in direct contrast to her expression. Her eyes were red, and she seemed rather uneasy. It looked as if she'd just been crying.

“Woof woof?”

“Nn. Tickles.”

She didn’t end up cheering up and smiling until after Urushi started to lick her.

That was when it finally hit me. The Beast Lord’s strength had totally broken her will, there was no way for her to have already recovered from it. She’d merely been putting up a front so she wouldn’t worry me.

And then there was the fact that we were just flat out gone by the time she got back. She wasn’t in exactly what I’d call mentally secure right now, so she ended up in a state of anxiety; she worried that we’d abandoned her.

And hence, Fran, a girl I’d always thought to have nerves of steel, had ended up crying.

I was assaulted by a sense of guilt. It was all my fault. I could’ve just appraised the Beast Lord’s guard whenever. There wasn’t really much of a point in going out of my way and doing it now of all times, even if I did feel a bit worried that we’d end up making enemies of them. I shouldn’t have acted on my impulses. I shouldn’t have let Fran all on her own.

[Sorry.]

“Not problem. But sleep together tonight.”

[Huh? Wait, what? You’re talking to me, right?]

“Nn.”

[But I’m a sword you know? I’m not exactly what you’d call huggable.]

“Don’t care.”

[Well, as long as you’re fine with it.]

“Urushi too.”

“Woof?”

And so, I ended up spending the night as Fran’s body pillow. I mean, I did have a sheath and all that, but I was still technically a sword, so... I didn’t exactly see how it was even the slightest bit comfortable, but whatever.

Fran ended up falling asleep wrapped in Urushi’s fur while also desperately clinging onto me with both arms.

[Welp. I got nothing to do.]

I wasn’t exactly able to mess around with my skills given that I didn’t want to wake Fran up. The only thing there really was for me to do was to stare at her face as she slept.

You know, this doesn’t seem too bad from time to time.

Chapter 179

Rumina's Oddity

The night passed, and with it, almost every remaining trace of Fran's display of weakness. She still seemed a bit frailer than usual, but the look on her face demonstrated that she was back to being herself.

I decided not to pursue the topic any further, and instead decided to discuss the day's plans with her over breakfast.

[How about diving back into the eastern dungeon and getting stuff done? You know, so we can rank up and all that.]

"Nn. Agreed."

"Woof."

Both seemed totally on board with my suggestion, possibly in part because they'd seen the extent of the Beast Lord's strength with their very own eyes.

I myself felt the same way. We would probably be able to take either Goldalfa or Royce one on one and somehow manage to win so long as we used everything we had at our disposal. It'd be pretty close, but not something we wouldn't be able to handle. The Beast Lord, on the other hand, was on a whole new level. Beating him in our current state was more or less just flat out impossible.

First was the fact that his stats were through the roof. He simply overwhelmed us from a numerical standpoint. We didn't even come close to holding a candle to his might. His skills more or less gave off the same impression. That is, he had a tonne of high leveled abilities we knew nothing about. He'd be able to exploit our lack of knowledge and completely obliterate us. The icing on the cake was his aura. He simply radiated an air of superiority. The way he carried and projected himself made him incredibly difficult to oppose.

The Beast Lord was a freak of nature, a walking natural disaster, and last but not least,

an entity that could turn into to an enemy of ours at any given moment. To be honest, that very fact almost made me want to just instantly throw in the towel.

[Let's just focus on finishing our quests as soon as possible instead of worrying about training and whatnot.]

"Nn."

We decided to try finishing all the requests we had on hand by the day's end if possible. We knew for a fact that we'd be able to finish them some time tomorrow at the latest.

The reason we thought such a tight schedule was even remotely possible was because we already knew where the monsters and traps spawned. Hence, we figured that it wouldn't take long for us to reach the dungeon's lower levels so long as we went all out.



It took us about an hour to get everything ready and arrive at the dungeon's entrance.

"Hey there little missy. You're headed back in already?"

"Nn."

"Alright. I know you're really skilled, so I think you'll probably be fine anyways, but I guess I'll tell you what I've been telling everyone else just in case. Be careful, the dungeon's been acting up a bit as of late."

"Acting up? Something happened?"

"Apparently the place has started to spawn magic beasts it didn't used to spawn in the past."

The guard cum dungeon receptionist stated that Evil Beings had been spotted within the dungeon's confines. The specific species discovered were all variants of goblins or orcs.

"The dungeon's structure hasn't seemed to have changed yet, but, there does seem to be something odd going on inside of it, so you'd best be on your guard."

“Got it.”

We entered the dungeon while heeding the guard’s advice, only to run into a goblin almost immediately after entering the dungeon.

The goblin left me a bit confused, as it was several times weaker than all the other stuff the dungeon typically spawned.

If anything, it made it seem like the dungeon had gotten much easier to handle than it’d been before, especially seeing as how its structure and trap placement had yet to change.

Getting on Urushi’s back and having him dash through the place made clearing the dungeon a ridiculously simple feat. It only took us about 3 hours to reach the 15th floor.

We spotted Evil Beings in the forms of orcs, goblins, and kobolds as we engaged in our descent. Again, I noted that all three species felt out of place, as none of them fit the dungeon’s theme or feel.

They didn’t really have any stealth skills, nor did they take advantage of the traps that happened to be lying around. If anything, it was the opposite. They’d end up popping and getting screwed by the traps more often than they’d actually make decent use of them.

I couldn’t help but wonder what’d happened. I mean, the fact that Rumina had done something was a given, but the things she’d done made absolutely no sense whatsoever.

“Evil beings. Weak.”

[Yeah, but they’ve kinda made clearing through the place a lot easier than usual.]

An easier clear wasn’t the only benefit we derived from whatever it was Rumina was doing either. We also managed to get a tonne of creation-type skills from the monsters we encountered, something we hadn’t really had any chances to get much of up till now.

The High Ogres we met starting at the 12th floor were especially helpful in that regard, as some had smithing and leather crafting skills that went all the way up to level 5. Naturally, they also had pretty decent combat skills, so I was able to profit out the ass by absorbing their magic stones.

The smithing and leather crafting skills were the ones that leveled the most though, as both hit level 3. None of the other skills gained nearly as many levels, but we still managed to give a boost to what was almost 20 different skills for free, so I wasn't complaining.

Again, I wasn't really complaining, but I did happen to notice an issue. It felt that more and more of the magic beasts were slowly getting swapped out for Evil Beings, which in turn meant that we were going to have trouble finishing the requests we'd set out to complete, as they required us to hunt certain magic beasts in particular.

[We should probably be a bit more careful of the traps from here on out. That said, let's keep pushing forward.]

"Nn."

[Urushi, you keep an eye out for enemies, alright boy?]

"Woof."

The only requests we had left to complete all involved retrieving materials from magic beasts that'd been rare and difficult to come across to begin with. It getting harder for us to find them only meant that actually finishing the requests would end up being a huge pain in the ass.

Or at least that's how things would've been had I been right.

[Sweet. That's one request out of the way.]

There basically weren't any Evil Beings past the 15th floor. If anything, there seemed to be more monsters than usual, so we actually managed to finish all the stuff we had to do without really eating up all that much time at all. I didn't get why everything had ended up the way it was, but it worked for us, so again, I didn't really mind it. That said, I figured it'd probably be a good idea for us to ask Rumina what was going on seeing as how we happened to be in the area anyways.

[Looks like we're done. Should still be around evening right now.]

"Will go visit Rumina."

[Go for it.]

I didn't know whether or not Dungeon Masters actually slept, so I actually would've been a bit concerned about visiting her if it was any later in the day. Fortunately for us, it wasn't.

We kept on guard as we entered the boss room, the room in which we defeated the Disaster Pillbug. Rumina had said that we'd be able to pass right through it, but we were a bit concerned that may no longer be the case given that there seemed to be something wrong with the dungeon.

But once again, my suspicions turned out to be needless. The worry we'd spent was completely wasted, as we were promptly greeted by both the teleporter that led back up to the dungeon's entrance and the passage that led to Rumina's quarters.

Naturally, Fran, Urushi and I chose to enter the latter of the two options presented, and made our way over to the room Rumina had invited us to last time.

She was in a bit of an unusual state; she was kind of just sitting there, completely zoned out. She didn't actually raise her face till after Fran called out to her.

"Hello."

"Why... Good evening, Fran..."

Wait, did she not actually realize that Fran'd been here? Was she maybe feeling a bit under the weather?

I couldn't tell. What I could tell was that she began beaming the moment she saw Fran, but reverted to a stern looking expression shortly after.

"Nn. Visiting."

"I see."

She was acting a bit cold. Last time, she welcomed us. This time, she didn't even do so much as even offer Fran a seat.

"Evil Beings appearing in dungeon."

"I see."

She barely responded even when Fran tried talking to her. It almost looked like she didn't want to welcome the younger black catgirl.

"Um..."

"Fran, it would be best for you to leave."

"What?"

"I have much to attend to, and very little time to mind you."

Rumina grabbed Fran, who was staring in blank surprise, by the shoulders and started pushing her towards the exit.

Wait what? Why was she acting so different?

I figured she probably had a reason of sorts, but I couldn't bring myself to accept her actions.

"Leave. You are disrupting me."

"Um..."

"Never return to my quarters."

Fran was, once again, flabbergasted. It didn't look like she could grasp Rumina's sudden change in attitude either.

I'd tried using the Principle of Falsehood real quick to double check whether or not she was just bullshitting us, but apparently she was telling the truth, Fran really was getting in her way. That, however, didn't necessarily mean that she really wanted to

treat Fran the way she was. The Principle of Falsehood wasn't almighty. It could tell the difference between a true statement and a false one, but it wasn't capable of figuring out the emotion that drove the statement. That was left to its user.

In my opinion, it'd be best for us to straight up ask her what was going on, for Fran's sake. Leaving the dungeon here and now, and thereby not fishing out Rumina's emotions, would lead to uncertainty. Fran would never know whether or not Rumina had really come to hate her, especially seeing as how it'd also become extremely difficult for the two to ever meet again.

Fran, however, would never be able to actually ask Rumina for the truth herself. She was too crestfallen, too... afraid. The fear she felt wasn't the same type of terror she'd felt when she met the Beast Lord. It was a sentiment much more emotional in origin than the primal, instinctual rejection of death. Fran was instead afraid of losing someone she'd grown attached to. She was afraid of being disliked by one of the few people she admired.

Rumina was the first fellow Black Catkin Fran had met after a life of solitude, the life she'd lived after losing both her parents and being sold into slavery. Moreover, she was someone that not only earned Fran's respect, but also treated her with affection. That was precisely why I found Fran's confusion to be completely understandable. She was in shock. There was no way she'd be able to doubt Rumina, let alone analyze her given the circumstances.

And that, in turn, meant that it was up to me to ask the question. It meant that I would have to expose myself, but I honestly could care less so long as it cleared things up between the two catgirls.

Given that, I steeled myself and spoke.

[So, are you really trying to reject Fran?]

Chapter 180

Of Master And Godblades

[So, are you really trying to reject Fran?]

“Who... exactly was that...?”

[Me.]

“A sword capable of speech...!? Are you perhaps an Intelligent Weapon?”

[I am.]

“Well... I am quite surprised to see that your race is one that truly exists.”

“Master. Exposed, okay?”

[Of course not. But it can't be helped at this point.]

This was my first time intentionally exposing myself to anyone other than Fran of my own accord, and to be honest, doing it made me feel like a fool. I immediately regretted my actions because I knew they were incredibly stupid, but ultimately ended up deciding that all was fine. As of this moment, my highest priority was no longer keeping my identity a secret. Nor was it minimizing the number of eyes on us. What mattered most right now was Fran. I couldn't let Rumina do something as detrimental to her as cutting all ties with us here and now.

While that was the driving force behind my decision, it wasn't the only one that'd pushed me to expose myself. To be frank, it was in part because I felt apologetic. Fran had made sure not to tell Rumina about me. She'd gone out of her way to keep a secret from the predecessor she respected from the bottom of her heart.

All for my sake.

The stress the act had caused her was only further evidenced by the light sigh she

breathed as I announced my identity.

“I see... And that would mean that your journey was not one spent in solitude... Knowing that puts my heart at ease.”

“Nn?”

“Mind me not. ‘Twas nothing.”

Nothing my ass. She too had clearly breathed a sigh of relief, one that proved she still cared for Fran. I mean, I’d clearly heard her. She’d even muttered that knowing Fran wasn’t alone had put her at ease.

It seemed that she really had just been putting on an act in order to keep Fran at bay.

“L-Let us move on and discuss matters of greater interest. Sword, are you by any chance a Godblade?”

Rumina brute forced her way through the conversation and blatantly changed the topic — not that I minded. We’d already gotten proof that her feelings for Fran hadn’t changed. In that sense, it was safe to say that I’d accomplished my goal.

[Unfortunately not. I was told by a famous blacksmith that I was nothing more than a sword with a strange ability.]

“And what precisely might this strange ability be?”

Hmmm... what do? I accidentally told her a bit more than I’d been intending to. In doing so, I allowed her to catch onto something that could lead all the way down the rabbit hole, and I wasn’t really sure exactly how much it would be best for me to say.

[Hey Fran, what do you think? Personally, I don’t really think we need to do anything more than just make a few brief mentions.]

(Can’t... just say everything...?)

Her response was exactly what I’d been expecting it to be. She didn’t want to keep any more secrets from Rumina. Besides, it seemed that the only other person the older Black Catkin was willing to meet face to face was Dias, and Dias already knew I was an

Intelligent Weapon anyways, so there kinda wasn't really that much of a point in hiding my abilities from her.

Besides, I wanted to abide by Fran's will. She really seemed eager to tell Rumina, and that alone was enough to convince me to give her the green light.

[You know what? Just go for it.]

(Thanks.)

And so, Fran began to speak. She told Rumina everything she knew about me. She told her how I used to be human, how I had the ability to absorb skills and magic stones, and how I had somehow first come to inside the centermost part of the Maohkami Plains.

To be fair, Fran wasn't the only one all gung ho about telling Rumina about me. The older Black Catkin was a Dungeon Master and one that'd lived for over 500 years at that. There was a chance she'd know a bit more than us about the circumstances surrounding my origin.

"Your sword can absorb skills by absorbing magic stones, you say? That is quite an interesting ability to have. C-Can it absorb any sort of skill whatsoever? Does it function with Unique Skills? What about Extra Skills?"

[I've pretty much been able to absorb any and every type of skill I've ever encountered so long as it comes from a magic stone.]

"So you truly have the ability to attain any skill you wish for..."

[Only if you can find a magic stone that happens to have it.]

"How... splendid! Hahahahahaha!"

"Something matter?"

Rumina suddenly broke out in a fit of laughter. I was a bit surprised, but could tell from the bright smile she wore on her face that she was still both lucid and sane.

"No, no, 'tis nothing. I simply laughed in response to what I had just come to realize."

[Right, I've been meaning to ask you. Why exactly were you rejecting Fran just now?]

"I have my reasons."

[And those reasons are...?]

"I must apologize. I cannot inform you of them. It is unfortunate, but I have no choice but to ask you to believe that my actions serve to Fran's benefit."

That, in other words, meant that whatever she'd been doing must be related in some way to Fran's evolution. Could she maybe have been doing something that would allow for Fran to evolve?

[But then why were you trying to distance yourself from her?]

"I wished to create distance between the two of us in order to prevent myself from harming her. It seems, however, that my efforts were in vain, as I have done precisely that regardless."

Rumina's expression wavered as she spoke.

"Fran..."

"Nn?"

"I am sorry."

Fran and I both stared in confusion as Rumina began bowing and apologizing immediately after she finished laughing.

"I have done you harm by making for myself a foolish choice. I would like to apologize to you from the bottom of my heart; I am truly sorry. My actions contained within them far too much haste."

"Doesn't matter if Rumina doesn't hate me."

"My emotions are all but given. I could not possibly bring myself to hate you, Fran."

"Thank goodness."

That was great and all, but her sudden change in attitude could only be described as odd. There had to be a reason for it. Looking back, I realized that Rumina stopped wanting to distance herself from Fran the moment she heard about my abilities, which in turn meant that my ability to absorb skills must be in some way related to Fran evolving. I wanted to pursue the topic further, but it didn't seem like something she'd be able to tell us more about.

"Your potential is truly astounding. Are you absolutely certain that you are not a Godblade?"

[Apparently I don't qualify because my stats are too low.]

"It appears that you are misinformed. Not all Godblades have been deemed so for their offensive abilities."

[Really?]

"Indeed. Hold for just a moment."

Rumina headed deeper into her quarters, only to return a bit later on with a scroll in hand.

"I apologize for the delay. Behold."

[What's this supposed to be?]

"'Tis an incomplete list of Godblades, one I obtained long in the past."

[Holy crap! You serious?]

I couldn't help but feel excited as hell after finding out what we had right in front of us.

The Godblade of Origin — Alpha — Ulmer
The Godblade of Insanity — Berserk — Dionysius
×The Blade of Wisdom — Cherubim — Ermella
The Warmount Blade — Chariot — Folkan
The Demon Lord's Blade — Diablo — Dionysius

The Seeker's Godblade — Explorer — Ermella
×The Blade of Zealotry — Fanatic — Dionysius
The Earth's Edge — Gaia — Ulmer
×The Holy Spirit Blade — Holy Order — Ulmer
The Blade of Imprisonment — Hell — Folkan
The Brilliant Flameblade — Ignius — Ulmer
×The Blade of Conviction — Judgement — Ulmer
The Emperor Serpent Blade — Jormungandr — Fargo
The Sacred Blade of Water — Krystalos — Ulmer
The Raging Dragonblade — Lindwurm — Fargo
×The Nuclear Strikeblade — Meltdown — Ulmer
The Moonbeam Blade — Moonlight — Kruselka
The Blade of Sorcery — Necronomicon — Ermella
The Divine Songblade — Oratorio — Kruselka
The Blade of Hypocrisy — Pacifist — Dionysius
The Winged Rainbow Blade — Quetzal — —

The list contained the names of a bunch of different Godblades alongside what I assumed to be the smiths that'd crafted them. Some were marked with an x, but I couldn't really figure out why.

"Do you happen to be familiar with the Extra Skill by the name of "Oracle?""

"No."

"It is a skill that allows one to pose questions to the Gods in exchange for a proportional amount of magical energy through the act of manifesting a God within one's body. This list was one created through said method, as there once existed an individual that had asked the Gods for the Godblades' locations."

But wait, why would the list be incomplete then? Was it because the guy cancelled his skill so he could start writing, or what?

"It appeared that the individual did not have enough magical energy for the Gods to heed his request. Thus, the skill began to drain his life force instead. Still, he hungered for knowledge and continued to write to his last breath. He was a fool to the end, and failed to even record all of the blades' names and creators."

[So why do some of them have x's beside their names?]

“The blades marked are blades that exist no more. I am unsure as to how they were lost, as I am doubtful as to how one would go about destroying a Godblade to begin with.”

So I guess that means Cherubim, Fanatic, Holy Order, Judgement, and Meltdown all got destroyed then.

“Alas, the list I have here is one over 500 years old. The information contained within it may no longer be accurate, as some of the list’s items may have long been replaced”

“I see.”

“Now, I would like to redirect your attention to a matter I wish to discuss. Specifically, I would like to direct your attention to the blade named Explorer.”

“Seeker’s Godblade.”

“Indeed. There exists another skill possesses a skill not too different from the Oracle skill I had just informed you of. It, Named Index, has the ability to provide additional information on whatever topic one wishes, so long as they know its name. The compensation required to activate this ability is, once again, magical energy.”

[I’m getting a bad feeling about this.]

“It is as per your conjectures. There once existed a man that had tried to use the skill in order to learn more about Explorer. He too had lost his life in the process.”

[I knew it!]

“He too left behind a document as death came knocking on his door. He testified that, while Explorer was capable of granting its user high leveled search and detection based abilities, it was in fact not exceptional in terms of its other specifications. It bore only the same strength as an average Magic Sword.”

[You serious?]

“Indeed. These two pieces of knowledge lead us but to a single conclusion. Not all Godblades are named as such for the sheer destructive force they provide. Given that,

I feel the temptation to classify you as a Godblade, but I cannot. For if you were truly a Godblade, you would possess a name granted by a God. Your lack of such a name can only serve to evidence that you are by no means a Godblade.”

You know, I actually kinda figured that after looking over the list she’d shown us. I didn’t really have the sort of fancy title you’d find attached to a Godblade. The only name I had was the one Fran gave me, and honestly, it was all I needed. At this point, being called Master made me proud. In fact, I’d go as far as to say that I wouldn’t actually be able to stand being referred to as anything else.

“Fret not. You may be no Godblade, but you are still an Intelligent Weapon, a sword that one could only deem as legendary.”

“Nn. Master amazing.”

I was glad she was trying to cheer me up and all, but it also kinda made me feel all embarrassed

.

[So who do you think might’ve made me anyways?]

“I have not the faintest idea. I have never seen any other Intelligent Weapons before you, nor do I know much of the altar situated within the Maohkami plains. I do, however, have a piece of information that you may find useful as a clue.”

[Do tell.]

“You simply must be the work of a God tier blacksmith.”

[But didn’t you just say I’m not a Godblade?]

“God blades are not all God tier blacksmiths work to create. Their reasons are numerous. Godblades are super weapons, and only 26 are ever allowed to exist in conjunction. Further, I have heard rumours that the crafting of such a blade takes upwards of 10 entire years worth of preparation.”

[10 whole years? The hell do use all that time for?]

“That is not a question I have the answer you, as, once again, the information’s source

is but a mere rumour.”

[Right. I guess that means I’m something someone happened to make between a few Godblade projects or something?]

“I believe that is indeed a possibility.”

I wasn’t sure whether I was supposed to be proud of the fact I was made by a God tiered blacksmith, or sad about not being a Godblade. But either way, I figured it’d probably be best for us to do a bit of research on God tiered blacksmiths, as it could potentially allow me to find out a bit more about how I came to be. Our conversation with Rumina made it so we now knew what we didn’t know, which, in and of itself, was a pretty decent bit of progress already.

Chapter 181

The Trio's Reasons

It turned out that Rumina really hadn't been lying about being busy. Her familiars came to consult her almost constantly, to which she would always respond by giving out a series of orders. The familiars she had out this time around seemed to be designed a bit differently from the one we saw last time we visited. They looked more like mannequins and had the ability to communicate through human speech.

"Do we need to summon any more go-"

"No, that is enough."

"Understood, ma'am."

"In fact, I believe it is time for us to stop summoning Evil Beings altogether."

"Yes, ma'am."

Given that she was still in the middle of something, we decided to ask her a few final questions before heading back on our way.

[Is it true that the only reason it's hard for Black Catkin to evolve is because the tribe suffered from from Divine Retribution?]

"Indeed. That is precisely the truth."

[So what happened? Why'd they get punished in the first place?]

"That... I cannot say."

Damn it, I figured as much. Her answer was a bit disappointing, but I was satisfied nonetheless. We weren't able to learn the juicy details we wanted to hear, but I was at least able to verify that Aurel's theory had been on the mark.

[So Aurel told us about that whole Ten Original Tribes thing. Was the Black Cat Tribe one of them?]

“I cannot say.”

It seemed that her saying she couldn't tell us was more or less equivalent to her affirming our statements, so I decided to continue asking her stuff to see if we could really dig at what we wanted to know. Naturally, the whole affirmative thing was just an assumption on my part, but something was better than nothing, and I was pretty confident I was right.

[So I remember seeing a cloak by the name of the “Black Heavenly Tiger's Mantle.” Does it have anything to do with the Black Catkin?]

The item I happened to be thinking of was one of the things Salrut had been wearing. Taking the item's name and assuming the worst possible scenario allowed me to come up with the conjecture that it was something made out of one or more evolved Black Catkin. Using a deceased beastkin as a material wasn't something that you could call within the realm of common sense, but the fact that he was a Reidosian made it so it didn't actually seem like too far a stretch.

“I believe that the most understandable reply to your inquiry would be one that comes in the form of an example. You are aware of the White Snow Wolves of the White Dog Tribe, correct? There used to exist a monster that shared the same name. It was referred to as the White Snow Wolf, and, like the Beastkin Tribe, descended from the Divine Beast. The difference between the two is that one was created through the union of a Divine Beast and a human, whereas the other was born from the union of the Divine Beast and an animal.”

You know, that actually doesn't even weird me out or anything. Earth's supposed Gods would do stuff like that too. Some went around taking different forms and having children with pretty much anything and everything.

“The two were once the same, but have now been separated in classification. One side is treated as would a human, while the other, as would a magic beast, a definition born from a time in which there was no choice but for them to consume one another for sustenance. But again, 'tis simply the talk of old. The magic beasts have long devolved and lost all resemblance to the Divine Beast save for their form. Moreover, the White Dog Tribe cares not whether one hunts the White Snow Wolf magic beast. This same

concept also applies to all the remaining nine original tribes.”

I guess that made sense. It seemed to be kinda like how I wouldn’t think much of people killing monkeys. There wasn’t any reason for me to accuse them for picking a fight with one of my ancestors just because they happened to murder one.

Welp, that was all I happened to want to know for now, so I figured it was time to go.

“I have heard that the Beast Lord has come to Ulmutt. Do be on your guard. Very little good is said of him.”

“Nn...”

Fran grimaced in response to Rumina mentioning the Beast Lord; she wasn’t completely over what’d happened yet.

[We’ve already met him.]

“What!? Has he done anything to you? Are you unharmed?”

[We’re fine, least for now. All he did was intimidate us a bit.]

The way I saw it, the Beast Lord hadn’t been intending on completely crushing Fran’s will. He just happened to be a bit too strong for his own good was all.

“Alright now.”

“A-Are you certain?”

“Nn.”

“S-Still, I believe it would be best for you to be on your toes. Not even I have the slightest clue as to the manner in which he will act.”

“Got it.”

“The current Beast Lord is known for the act of parricide. I doubt it is even possible to be too careful when in his vicinity.”

Rumina made a bit of a dreadful face as she issued us a warning. She bore for the Beast Lord what appeared to be a rather deep seated sense of resentment, one that I couldn't help but want to assume came from a personal grudge she bore for one of his ancestors.

The thought jogged my memory and reminded me about something we'd heard from Dias. He'd said that the Beast Lord was the first to order the Black Cat Tribe to be sold into slavery. If that were true, then Rumina herself most likely knew quite a bit more about it, not that she'd be able tell us anything either way.

"I would just like to say it once more to emphasize that I really do mean it. Be careful, the both of you."

"Nn."

[Yeah, we know.]

"Good."

Rumina nodded before continuing.

"Ah, right. Before you leave, I would like to ask you to complete a task. Could you relay for me a message to Dias?"

"Message?"

"I would simply like for you to ask him to come see me."

"Got it."

"Now go. Do be careful on your way back, and look forward to what is to come."

"Nn?"

[Look forward to what now?]

"Hahaha! That, I cannot say. What I can say, however, is that Fran was lucky to have met you, Master. And for that, I am thankful."

Rumina refused to say another word, so ended up bidding her farewell without learning any additional details.

We hurried over to the guild the moment we left the dungeon. This time, we'd actually managed to get ahold of Dias. We weren't unlucky enough to actually end up having a second run in with the Beast Lord.

"Have you already completed all your remaining requests?"

"Nn. Here."

Fran handed the materials we'd gotten over to Dias, who immediately confirmed that there wasn't anything wrong with any of the stuff we'd procured. He was a bit surprised at how quick we managed to get everything done, but ended up conforming he could now elevate Fran's rank regardless.

Dias called over one of his subordinates and issued to him a few orders. Specifically, he told him to queue two announcements. The first was that Fran had been promoted to C rank. The second was that she'd accepted a designated request.

[You sure it's okay to announce that she's accepted a designated request?]

"Don't sweat it. It's just a little something I'm doing to keep a few certain individuals in check. I know for sure that the Beast Lord wouldn't want to antagonize us in any which way."

Well, I guess that's fine then.

"Want to ask something."

"What is it?"

[You remember the Black Catkin you used to talk to about 53 years ago?]

"I see... I guess that means Aurel let the cat out of the bag."

"Nn."

"Oh, right, that reminds me. Did you guys happen to have some sort of run in with the

Beast Lord?”

[How’d you know?]

I had Perfect Thought Isolation up and running, so there was no way for him to have read our minds.

“Heh. Just wanted to remind you that I am technically a professional. Did you really think I wouldn’t be able to read you just because I’m not actually reading your mind anymore? I’m not actually totally reliant on the skill, you know?”

[Seriously?]

“Seriously. It’s mostly because Fran happened to react the moment I mentioned the Beast Lord is all.”

Honestly, I should’ve seen this coming. Dias was not only a Guildmaster, but also someone whose skills focused around the concept of taking advantage of other people’s weaknesses.

“Met in front of guild.”

“I’m guessing you ran into him yesterday then?”

“Nn.”

[We happened to run into him when we tried checking in with you yesterday.]

“That’s unfortunate. He happens to be the type of person that considers intimidation as a method of negotiation. You know how he was pretty much full force when he came to visit? I guess it still is a passable behaviour though, since it stops people from picking fights with him...”

[What’s that supposed to mean?]

“Well, I guess I might as well tell you. Have a seat.”

“Nn. Got it.”

Dias personally brewed us a pot of tea, sat down, and started to speak.

“It all happened 53 years ago. Both Aurel and I were still just D ranked newbies back then.”

Wait wait, wouldn't that mean they managed to become D rankers while they were still in their teens? Honestly, that sounded pretty damned impressive if you asked me.

“I was really proud back then. I loved to brag about all my achievements. But one day, she showed up, and in doing so, tore my beloved pride to shreds.”

“Black catkin girl?”

“The Black Catkin girl indeed. Her name was Kiara, and back then, she'd only been a mere 15 years old. Me and Aurel, we honestly used to look down on her, but not because she was a Black Catkin. The reason we didn't really approve of her was because she was younger than us. We didn't really think adventuring was something a kid could pull off.”

I guess adventurer culture really hasn't changed in the last 50 odd years, has it?

“Our negative view of her, however, was incredibly short lived. She shut us up almost immediately by putting her strength on display, as she would always beat up anyone that mocked her. I can't deny that she had the tendency to go a bit overboard, but that only served to emphasize her ability. Though she only went solo, her dungeon raids could only be described as extremely successful. I don't know exactly when it happened, but she ended up earning herself a nickname, we adventurers had started referring to her as “The Black Cat.” “

That's pretty damned impressive. I wonder, did she have some sort of magic item that assisted her? Or was she simply a genius of some sort?

“So a few things happened, and she ended up saving both Aurel and I from certain death. The three of us started partying up thereafter from time to time. Honestly, she was a lot of fun to be around. I don't recall ever being bored in her presence.”

“Fell in love?”

“Ahahahaha! Man, you just went straight there without a moment's hesitation.

Hmmm... I'm not quite sure, to be honest. What I can say for sure though is that I used to look up to her, and that she was indeed quite the beauty."

Dias' smile was tinged with an ever so slight bit of sadness. It seemed he still missed her.

"Kiara... wanted to evolve. She'd already hit her maximum level, but didn't know what to do thereafter, or at least until she met Rumina. The two talked about several different things on several different occasions. One of their conversations seemed to have ended up giving Kiara a hint as to what she needed to do, and thus, prompted her disappearance."

"Seemed?"

"I put it that way because I don't actually know what happened to her. She disappeared before telling me any details."

[Did she disappear so she could go evolve?]

"I doubt it. At one point, she'd told both Aurel and I that she wanted to us to accompany her and lend her our abilities so that she could evolve."

Huh, then why'd she end up leaving without saying anything to either of them then? She had to have a pretty damned good reason to just up and vanish.

"Aurel and I both came to the conclusion that she got involved in some sort of incident, so we tried our best to find her. In the end, all we managed to get were a few hints."

"Details?"

"The first hint was that Rumina and Kiara seemed to have ended up arguing with each other just before it happened. Aurel happened to overhear the latter shout at the former while telling her to mind her own business, and that she was going too far."

I wonder what ended up leading to that? Rumina didn't really seem to be the type that'd try to harm a Black Catkin.

"Well, that part's actually not too relevant. Kiara's disappearance wasn't Rumina's fault. That much, I verified with by reading Rumina's mind."

Specifically, he'd drawn the conclusion because Rumina had ended up reacting with both surprise and sorrow when she caught wind of Kiara's disappearance.

"However, it seemed that Kiara really had caught on to what Black Catkin needed to do to evolve. Hence why I thought it to be something to do with her disappearing."

[Did someone end up targeting her because they found out she knew what to do in order to evolve?]

"That's what I thought too. I even actually ended up identifying the person likely responsible for her disappearance..."

"Who?"

"I was convinced it was the Beast Lord that happened to be in power at the time, the current Beast Lord's father. To be more exact, the perpetrators had been the Blue Catkin that worked under him. I don't have any real proof, but I did manage to get myself enough evidence to at least make them out to be suspects."

Dias and Aurel had heard rumours of several Blue Catkin often visiting the place she stayed at immediately following her disappearance. Thus, they investigated them.

They used Aurel's influence and information network to snoop around until they came across a piece of information that stated that the the Beast Lords of old weren't actually Golden Lionkin, but instead Black Tigerkin.

From that, the two came to the conclusion that the Golden Lionkin had ended up usurping the Black Tigerkin after the latter incurred the Gods' wrath.

The Golden Lionkin had obtained dominion over the Beastkin. But even then, they were still afraid, terrified that the Black Tigerkin may one day reclaim what was once theirs. Hence, they eliminated any and all documents pertaining to the the past, destroyed anything that would hint at what the Black Catkin needed to do in order to evolve, and ordered the Blue Catkin to persecute them and keep them as weak as possible. And that, in turn, explained precisely why none of the other tribes give the Blue Cat Tribe flak for selling their fellow beastkin into slavery; the ruling tribe had their backs.

It was a deal the Blue Cat Tribe only derived benefit from. They not only rose in prestige, but also gained a significant source of income from their dealings in the slave trade. Plus, it was an opportunity for them to trample upon those that'd been thought of as superior to them, an opportunity they took with glee. Through this, one could clearly tell that the Blue Cat Tribe's disdain for the Black Cat Tribe remained despite the fact that the Gods had erased from their memories the other tribe's sins.

"We tortured and interrogated all the Blue Catkin in town at the time, only to find that one of their higher ups, one that still resided within the Beastkin's country, had ordered Kiara's capture. Through that, we also learned that the Beast Lord had sent a skilled warrior that hailed from a tribe that'd served by his side for generations, and that said warrior had happened to come in contact with Kiara."

In other words, the Beast Lord had either killed, kidnapped, or silenced Kiara...

Hearing Dias' tale had caused Fran to become angrier than I'd ever seen her before. She trembled in rage and irradiated an air of bloodlust so powerful that I actually felt grateful we were talking to Dias in particular. Her desire to kill had swollen up to the point where it'd probably terrify just about anyone else.

"Truth?"

"Again, I can't really say 100% for certain, as these are just my deductions, nothing more, nothing less. That said, I'm convinced that she did end up getting involved with the Beast Lord."

"Ok."

Fran's expression turned dark. I felt as if she probably would've charged straight at the Beast Lord and challenged him had she not been aware of the extent of his strength. Having met him, she and I were now both aware just how bad an idea that was. Approaching him without a plan could only lead to death. To make matters worse, his guards were highly capable. We'd at least need Fran to evolve before even thinking of challenging him. Knowing that, Fran held herself back, but in doing so, ended up clenching her fists so hard that she started bleeding.

"I know you're angry, but don't go challenging the Beast Lord, alright?"

"Nn..."

Fran nodded despite being about as frustrated as could be. She probably would've immediately stormed over, beat the crap out of him, and made him divulge everything she knew if she could.

"Listen. Don't throw your life away. Evolve and get stronger before even thinking of challenging him."

"Nn."

Dias shifted gears and began talking about his association with Rumina.

The two of them suffered a mental blow from Kiara's disappearance, and thus, ended up agreeing to a pact, one in which both parties would work to support any Black Catkin that happened to follow in her footsteps, any Black Catkin that sought evolution.

Rumina used her abilities in order to create a second dungeon, Ulmutt's western dungeon. She'd intentionally crafted it as a training ground for new adventurers, for Black Catkin that wished to become more powerful. The western dungeon was advertised as a second dungeon, its own independent labyrinth. But in reality, that wasn't the case. It was merely an extension of the eastern one. There was no second Dungeon Master. The role had simply been played by Rumina all along.

That wasn't all she did either. She'd also saved up as much strength as she could in order to assist any and all Black Catkin that'd reached their level caps in the process of evolution. Dias didn't know the particulars himself. Rumina couldn't tell him what was needed for Black Catkin to evolve. However, she was able to tell him that he was still able to be of assistance. She would need an exorbitant amount of magical energy in order to provide the assistance she wished to. It wasn't an amount that was outside of the scope of her abilities so long as she conserved as much as she could over the course of several decades. That, however, wasn't something she could just do. There were naturally downsides to her actively conserving her magical energy. The act of it left the dungeon defenseless. She needed a method by which she could ward off powerful adventurers in the meantime.

And that was where Dias came in.

He reported to the Adventurer's Guild and state that he'd managed to negotiate with

the Dungeon Master. That, of course, wasn't all. He also spoke to the country's leaders and convinced them that the dungeon was valuable, both for its resources and for its ability to rear new adventurers. The scheme paid off. The Kingdom viewed his contributions as phenomenal, and hence, he was not only able to guarantee Rumina's safety, but also become the city's Guildmaster.

Dias had done it.

He'd obtained all the power he needed in order to protect the Black Cat Tribe.

The elderly adventurer's words hadn't contained even the slightest shred of falsehood. He, Aurel and Rumina were all truly working towards the same two goals: identifying Kiara's enemies and protecting the Black Cat Tribe as a whole. That was why all three individuals had treated Fran so favourably.

"We'll announce that you've ranked up some time tomorrow."

"Nn. Got it."

"That said, there is an official process that we need to go through. Why don't we go ahead and get all that out of the way right here and now?"

Chapter 182

Getting One's Thoughts in Order

We headed back to the inn after we finished going through the formal rank up procedure.

[Looks like we're finally officially C rankers.]

"Nn."

[Let's throw a bit of a celebration. How about this, I'll let you guys can eat as much curry as you want tonight. There won't be any limit on the number of toppings you can have either.]

"Nn! Want curry with hamburgers, karaage, tonkatsu, egg on top. Extra large."

I gave Fran exactly what she asked for. The end result turned into something that looked like it came straight out of a food challenge, but whatever. She was happy, and that was all that mattered.

[Try not to bloat yourself too much, alright?]

"No problem."

[And as for you, Urushi, I've finally made that super spicy stuff I promised you yesterday.]

"Bark bark."

The pot of curry I showed Urushi was a modified version of the spiciest curry I had sitting around in storage. I added a whole sloth of extra spice to it and caused the amount of capsaicin within to skyrocket. The liquid within had been turned crimson, and almost looked like a boiling vat of blood that'd come straight out of hell. To Urushi, however, the mixture evidently looked and smelled delicious, as he immediately began to drool the moment I procured it.

I honestly didn't really get how or why he was actually looking forward to consuming the stuff. It was so spicy that it even caused Fran to reel back; she didn't even want to try it. I felt that I probably would've reacted the exact same way had I still been human.

The pair went through their curry incredibly quickly, so I decided to serve them some desert in the form of ice cream as I began getting my thoughts in order. I decided not to think about the possibility of me having been made by a God-tier blacksmith, and only focused on concepts related to Fran and evolution.

The Black Cat Tribe was one of the original ten, and the tribe had originally held either the Beast Lord's position or something similar. That, however, all changed somewhere in the neighborhood of 500 years ago.

We were never able to figure out exactly what the Black Cat Tribe's sin had been, but whatever it was, it was enough to merit having the Gods deliver onto them Divine Retribution. Specifically, the Gods changed the conditions under which Black Catkin evolved; they made it much more difficult. Not a single individual had managed to fulfill the necessary requirements ever since.

And that was when the Red Cat Tribe's Golden Lionkin stepped in. They toppled the powerless Black Cat Tribe's rule, and stole for themselves the Beast Lord's seat. They then ordered the Blue Cat Tribe's members to persecute the Black Catkin in order to prevent them from ever regaining their former glory. It was an order the Blue Cat Tribe had likely abided by due to the fact that the Red Cat Tribe was one of the original 10, and therefore of a higher status. It was a firm measure, but it alone failed to sate the Red Cat Tribe's concerns. They still feared that the Black Cat Tribe could one day rise again to power, and thus, they destroyed any and all texts relating to the Black Cat Tribe's evolution. It was a plan that, in their eyes, ensured that no Black Catkin would ever evolve again.

Their efforts paid off; the combination of the Gods manipulating everyone's memory and the Red Cat Tribe eliminating all the relevant documentation made it so that the Black Cat Tribe's history had almost been forgotten. The number of people possessing knowledge of their ability to evolve had been cut down to just a few handfuls at best.

But, 53 years ago, someone had pulled off the nigh impossible. That someone, Kiara, had started solving the mysteries that shrouded the Black Cat Tribe's past. She managed to get in touch with Rumina, and in doing so, somehow managed to find a

clue that led her towards her goal, evolution. She'd asked both Dias and Aurel for their assistance in evolving, but disappeared before telling either of the two any further details.

All three of the people that Kiara had bonded with, Rumina, Dias, and Aurel, attempted to figure out what had happened to her. They gathered information from all over, only to ultimately arrive at the deduction that her disappearance most likely had something to do with the Beast Lord. They were fairly confident in what they'd thought up, but had no way of confirming it for certain. For that reason, all three individuals happened to regard the Beast Lord with a sense of animosity.

To be frank, I thought their theory seemed like it'd pretty much hit the nail on the head. The royal family being afraid Black Catkin even to this very day was honestly quite plausible.

Either way, Kiara's whereabouts ended up remaining as an unknown. None of the three were really ever able to move on, and so, they ended up banding together in order to protect any that followed in their friend's footsteps.

Dias was unaware as to the details, and hence, unable to inform us, but we were still made to know that Rumina had been storing magical energy for decades, and that said magical energy would be used in order to aid one or more Black Catkin in their quest for evolution. Both Aurel and Dias were assigned the role of protecting her in the meantime, as saving up her magical energy was equivalent to her lowering her defenses. I'd say the two were quite persistent in their task. Dias had even gone as far as becoming the master of Ulmutt's Adventurer's Guild.

Fast forward a few years to present day, and finally, enter Fran, a young Black Catkin girl out on a journey to achieve the exact thing they'd been looking to facilitate. Unaware to us, the three had played a bunch of cards under the table in order to assist us in the whole ordeal. Specifically, Aurel had arranged for us to meet Rumina while Dias had tried his best to help us rank up so he could confer upon us the guild's protection.

Rumina had also started setting something up. I didn't know exactly what that something was, but I did know that it was something that'd work to Fran's benefit.

My lack of understanding was precisely what fueled me to think further on the topic. Why exactly did she start summoning Evil Beings? For what reason did she try driving

Fran away? Her changing her attitude the moment she heard about my ability to absorb skills made it obvious that said ability must in some way be related to helping Fran evolve, but how? Did I need some sort of skill in particular? Was it something we could get from Evil Beings?

There were too many holes and missing links for me to go any further with my deductions. I couldn't figure out anything unless I had a bit more information, and so, I decided to shelve my thoughts for the time being. The Martial Arts Tournament was coming up, we didn't have time for me to just sit around and think myself into a ditch. What we needed to do now was to train and level our skills if possible.

[Oh yeah, Fran, remember how I told you to think about how you wanted me to use my Self-Evolution Points? Did you ever end up figuring out what skills you wanted to level?]

"Nn."

I'd originally been planning to ask her about this last night, but you know, shit happened.

My guess was that she probably wanted to at least put a few points in both Divine Sword Arts and Divine Sword Techniques, as they were straight forward, something she used often, and probably two of the skills that'd give us the greatest boost in strength.

Presence Detection was a pretty likely contender as well. It was pretty close to its maximum level, and could see some decent use in battle. Its sensing abilities aided us in reading the opponent's next move.

The other fairly likely contenders were Flame Magic, Lightning Magic, and Elemental Blade.

[So what've you decided on?]

I was fairly confident in my deductions.

"Blacksmithing."

But I was wrong nonetheless.

[Wait. What? Blacksmithing!?!]

My predictions were off by a mile. They were so far off, in fact, that I ended up shouting in surprise.

“Nn.”

[What? I don’t recall you ever having even the slightest interest in Blacksmithing. Shouldn’t you try investing in something that’ll help you out in battle seeing as how the tourney’s right around the corner? Why choose it all of a sudden?]

“Because Blacksmithing.”

It seemed that Fran had totally made up her mind, and that I wasn’t going to be able to convince her to change it.

“Master’s maintenance, important.”

[That’s why you wanted to level up the Blacksmithing skill? I really appreciate the thought, but I don’t think you need to use points on it. Go ahead and just level up the skills you actually want.]

“Blacksmithing.”

And so, given the fact that Fran was being stubborn, I ended up maxing out the Blacksmithing skill.

《Blacksmithing has reached its maximum level. You have obtained the Blacksmith Magic skill. It is currently at level 1.》

I ended up getting the Blacksmith Magic skill as an added bonus. That was nice and all, seeing as how it became possible for me to maintain myself and whatnot, but I had a bit of a hard time accepting the fact that we ended up using my self evolution points for Blacksmithing of all things. It just felt wasteful.

“Nn!”

[Wait, Fran, what’re you doing?]

“Maintenance.”

[Right now?]

“Nn.”

I really had to admit, Lv 10 Blacksmithing really did prove quite effective. Fran was pretty much doing exactly the same thing she’d always been doing, but it ended up feeling just as good as when Zerld did it. Fran rubbing a cloth across my blade felt as good as a full body massage.

[Ahhhhhh, yeahhhhh, that’s the spot.]



I ended up getting polished for a whole 30 minutes; I wasn’t really able to ask her to stop because of how good it felt.

Thinking about the fact that Fran planned to polish me every day put a huge grin on my face. Man, this is the life. I guess I finally understand why fathers love it so much when their daughters give them backrubs.

[Oh man, that was refreshing. Thanks.]

“Will polish more in future.”

[Please do.]

I’d been planning on using most of the rest of my remaining self-evolution points on a few specific skills, but realized that Fran hadn’t benefited at all from me maxing out Blacksmithing, so I offered to let her use all the points I had left on whatever she wanted.

“Already chose what wanted. Will let Master use rest.”

[But...]

“Just use.”

I ended up conceding to Fran and spending points on whatever I wanted. Specifically, I ended up throwing a bunch into Divine Sword Arts. It went without saying that leveling the skill worked to Fran's benefit, but that wasn't the only reason I pointed it.

The other was something that I'd ended up becoming curious about after seeing the Beast Lord's skillset. He was a bonafide spearman. His job described him as a Spear Lord and he evidently had one equipped. However, he didn't have access to Spear Arts or Divine Spear Arts. He instead had a skill by the name of Spear Lord Arts.

Spear Lord Arts was, in all likelihood, what one would obtain after completely maxing out one's Divine Spear Arts. From that, I figured that maxing Divine Sword Arts could potentially unlock a new skill, and hence, wanted to try getting my hands on it.

[Alright, here we go.]

Maxing both Blacksmithing and Divine Sword Arts ended up eating a total of 34 points, and left me with only 20 remaining.

«Divine Sword Arts has reached its maximum level. You have obtained the Enhanced Sword Arts skill.»

Well, that wasn't what I was expecting, but hey, that works too I guess.

«You have unlocked a unique skill by the name of Sword Lord Arts, as all necessary requirements have been fulfilled. All Sword Art related skills have been merged into the Sword Lord arts skill. Acquisition of the Sword Lord Arts skill has caused your wielder, Fran, to obtain the Sword Lord title.»

Woah, that was a lot all at once! It looked like I actually did manage to get the Sword Lord Arts skill that I'd been hoping for. The merged part confused me, so I quickly appraised myself. Every single last one of my Sword Art related skills had ended up disappearing. Naturally, I wasn't just referring to the Divine Sword Arts skill, but also stuff like Short Sword Arts and Katana Arts.

For a moment, I was tempted to immediately begin screaming in frustration, but stopped almost immediately as I realized what the word "merged" meant. I decided to give the skill a quick once over just to be sure.

Sword Lord Arts: Allows use of all swords.

Oh hell yes. This means what I think it means, right?

[Hey Fran.]

“Nn?”

[I’m going to shapeshift a bit. Do me a favour and try swinging me around when I do.]

“Got it.”

The first form I took was that of a dagger, otherwise known as a short sword. Fran readily grabbed ahold of me and began swinging me around. She cycled between a series of relaxed and more intense actions so easily that one could probably mistake her as a sword dancer.

[Alright, how about this?]

The next form I took was that of a foil, a fencer’s sword. Again, Fran managed to wield me with ease. The way she moved around and used the sword’s flexibility made it seem like she’d trained with a foil for years and in doing so, completely mastered the blade’s use.

“Interesting to use. Boingy.”

[Does it feel even the slightest bit unnatural?]

“Nope. No issues.”

[Sweet.]

The skill did exactly what I thought it did. It basically allowed the person that had it to use any type of sword they wished. Better yet, they’d be able to use it just as well as if they had they maxed out the divine arts for whatever sword subcategory they happened to be working with. To us, that was nothing but good news, as it meant that there wouldn’t be any issues even if I was to warp myself into an actual katana and not just something that happened to resemble one.

With that out of the way, I decided to check Fran's new title.

Sword Lord: A title granted to one that mastered the way of the sword and obtained the Sword Lord skill.

Effect: All stats increased by 20. Bolsters the Enhanced Sword Arts skill. Allows one to judge the quality of a sword.

Sword Lord looked to be even more effective a title than both Match For a Thousand and Big Game Eater despite the fact that both titles were typically only bestowed to heroes. Boosting all one's stats by 20 provided the same amount of effective strength as four or five levels.

Though, thinking about it, I realized that maxing out one's Divine Weapon Arts was actually incredibly difficult under normal circumstances. In fact, neither Amanda nor Forrund had actually managed to do so, and they were both famous A ranked adventurers.

It looked like maxing out Divine Sword Arts was indeed the right choice to make. I immediately considered maxing out Divine Sword Techniques to match, but I wasn't 100% sure if that was the best idea. I had a few other skills I wanted to pump points into as well.

[Hey Fran, you sure you didn't want me to point anything else in particular?]

"Nn... Dimensional Magic?"

Chapter 183

Dimension Gate

Fran's reply to my query caught me off guard. The fact that she was interested in Dimension Magic wasn't something I'd been aware of.

That said, I could easily see why she felt the way she did, as I shared her interest in it.

[You sure you don't want to pump a few points into Divine Sword Techniques first?]

"More curious about Dimension Magic."

[Why's that?]

"Door used by Beast Lord's guard."

[Oh nice. Looks like we're on the same page then.]

Royce's skill, Dimensional Gate, sounded like something one would probably learn if they pumped a few levels into Dimension Magic. It looked super convenient to use, and it seemed that having it could potentially make visiting Rumina a hell of a lot easier.

Long Jump was nice and all, but it was too limited in its use.

The number of things that bothered us about it numbered two, with the first being its carrying capacity and the second being its ease of use, or rather, its lack thereof. Its carrying capacity was limited by mass, and was actually so lacking that it couldn't even allow us to warp Urushi unless he shrank himself down. Even then, the distance that could be teleported was inversely proportional with the mass, so we weren't really able to go all that far. The furthest we could go, even without Urushi, was like five or six floors worth of distance at best; we weren't able to instantly warp ourselves over to Rumina's place of residence. The ease of use part pertained to the fact the only objects that could get warped were ones the caster was in direct contact with.

Dimension Gate looked like the type of skill that didn't really care about the mass of whatever it transported so long as you plopped a pair of doors down. It didn't look like the type of skill that really had much use in battle, but, man did it make getting around a helluva lot easier. The convenience factor alone made it look like something that was honestly well worth investing in.

[Alright. I guess I'll try feeding Dimension Magic a bit and seeing what happens.]

I only had 20 self evolution points remaining, so I decided to give the skill one level at a time.

"That's level 2... Looks like I learned how to do two new things?"

Pointing the skill once had allowed me to obtain a skill by the name of Turn Shield. It allowed one to block long ranged attacks and disrupt enemies by twisting space itself. The amount of magical energy the skill consumed scaled with the size of the spatial distortion created. Unleashing something on a scale large enough to completely engulf my surroundings seemed like it would end up eating somewhere in the neighborhood of 2k mana. The skill seemed pretty decent, and appeared to have a whole slew of different use cases.

The other spell I learned was named Beacon. It allowed me to sense the areas in which and objects on which I cast it, even from a fair distance away. It was pretty convenient, but I didn't immediately see why it was something I got from leveling up Dimension Magic of all things. I only came to realize why it was classified as it was after giving its parent skill another level.

Getting Dimension Magic to level 3 unlocked a skill by the name of Apport. Apport allowed me to pull anything within sight towards me. It didn't seem all that special at first glance, but thinking about it made me to realize that moving an object towards oneself was actually a step up on moving oneself over to an object.

Combining it with Beacon only made it even more impressive; Apport became able grab anything I wanted so long as it happened to have a beacon placed on it ahead of time. This use case immediately caused me to realized that Beacon was capable of working with more than just Apport. It also enhanced Long Jump, and allowed me to teleport even greater distances with it. Beacon had seemed rather plain at first, but it turned out to be something hella useful.

Apport wasn't all I got from level 3 Dimension Magic. I also managed to learn Over Haste, which was basically just the same thing as regular Haste, save for the fact that it had a bit of an AOE to it.

Only after pointing Dimension Magic all the way to level 4 did we finally get the skill we'd been gunning for.

[Sweet, looks like I finally learned how to use Dimension Gate.]

Dimension Gate's ability was to create a pair of doors. The first would always appear at the caster's present location. The second, on the other hand, was up to the caster's discretion, but could only be placed in an area that lay within the caster's memory. Anything could pass through the gate, so long as it fit, which was just perfect seeing as how the gate's size would grow based on the amount of magical energy used. I was capable of creating one big enough to fit Urushi at his largest if I didn't mind throwing in all my mana.

Our skill, Dimension Gate, was actually slightly different from the Dimensional Gate skill that we'd seen on Royce. Though their names were similar, the two actually functioned completely differently, as ours basically just ripped a hole in space, whereas Royce's seemed to operate based on a different sort of mechanism altogether.

Dimension Gate was like every other spell derived from the Dimension Magic family; its performance could be improved upon through the use of Beacon.

Specifically, Dimension Gate was capable of opening doors to places I'd never been before so long as there happened to be a beacon present — we'd confirmed this functionality by casting Beacon on a random rock and having Urushi carry it off somewhere.

The spell seemed like it could be really handy so long as we were careful and placed a few beacons at a few critical junctions ahead of time.

Under normal circumstances, Beacons would expire after a few days. The caster could extend this preset duration by increasing the amount of mana used in the spell's initial casting. It seemed like I'd be able to leave a beacon somewhere for about a year so long as I put every single last drop of mana I had into crafting it.

I figured it'd be a pretty good idea for us to just casually dump a beacon somewhere

in Rumina's living quarters in order to make it easier for us to visit her whenever. The gate's size would decrease as distance to its target location increased, but it didn't seem like it'd be too hard for us to somehow fit ourselves through it regardless.

The other spell I was granted for leveling Dimension Magic to level 4 was called Slow Mine, and more or less allowed us to deploy triggerable debuff zones. They were hard to detect, and could be placed both on the ground and in the air. Our ability to deploy multiple at once seemed pretty useful for allowing us to catch someone off guard.

[Looks like we managed to get the skill we wanted. Did you happen to have anything else in mind?]

Each level in Dimension magic ate up 3 self evolution points, so getting the skill all the way to level 4 left us with only 11 remaining.

I mean, we could've just kept pumping points into Dimension Magic regardless, but we did always have the option of just doing something else instead. It wasn't like we were locked into it or anything.

"Vigour Mastery...?"

[Why that one in particular?]

"Beast Lord had. Might have connection with evolution."

Looking at the Beast Lord's stat sheet had more or less convinced us that Vigour Mastery was basically an upgraded version of Vigour Manipulation. The reason she wanted it was pretty clear as well. She wanted get all the skills the Beast Lord had that we didn't, as it was possible that evolution was something linked to a skill.

[Sure. Let's give it a shot then.]

"Nn."

I spent 5 points on Vigour Manipulation, which in turn unlocked Vigour Mastery as expected.

[So? How do you feel?]

“...?”

It turned out that Vigour Mastery didn't have anything to do with evolution. However, it had a clear, immediate effect nonetheless. The manner in which my mana flowed through my body seemed to change. It became much smoother, and I could feel my detection-based skills growing much more sensitive as a result.

But that wasn't all.

[I feel like my body just got easier to control.]

I activated Shape Shift and transformed a part of my body into a series of threads. The threads seemed quite easy to manipulate; I'd managed to use them to form a number of different geometrical patterns with ease. I then split my blade into ten smaller pieces, and moved them all around simultaneously. I was able to do what the System Announcer did to the Legendary Skeletons did back when we fought a whole bunch of them at once. That is, I was able to form each into a thin but solid thread and thrust them in different directions.

My blade deformed and moved exactly how I wanted it to; I became capable of manipulating it to much finer a degree, and at a much lower mana cost to boot.

Vigour Mastery hadn't seemed like anything too fancy, but it turned out to be useful as hell.

[Want to just hold onto the last few points for now?]

“Nn. Sounds good.”

Chapter 184

The Dungeon's Barrier

We immediately headed back into the dungeon the day after we ranked up, reason being that it was critical for us to get as strong as possible as quickly as possible given that the tourney was right around the corner.

Both Sword Lord Arts and Dimension Magic were incredibly potent skills in and of themselves, but we wouldn't be able to use either properly if we didn't first accustom ourselves to them. To that end, we decided to fight while purposefully imposing upon ourselves a series of heavy restrictions.

Doing combat training also doubled up as grinding magic stones, as we'd be able to earn another batch of self-evolution points if we did enough of it. Training was a reliable, proven way for us to get stronger. Though it was definitely important, it didn't end up being the only thing we did. We had also visited the guild prior to heading out in order to check whether or not it'd be possible for Fran to undergo a class change and beef up her stats.

One would assume that obtaining the Sword Lord title would also unlock the Sword Lord class, but unfortunately, it didn't. She did, however, unlock a whole slew of other classes, many of which centered around smithing or advanced magic. The training she'd gone through had also allowed her to unlock several stealth and scout-like classes as well, but none were to our fancy. Thus, she ended up remaining a Magic Warrior.

Upon entering the dungeon, we discovered that it'd turned back to normal. The Evil Beings that'd flooded it were nowhere to be seen. They'd been replaced by the magic beasts we saw on our first pass through. In other words, Rumina had reverted all the changes she'd made.

Knowing that, we cut our way through dungeon and slowly progressed towards its depths.

Fran needed to be back in town within 4 days, as that was when the tourney's prelims

were set to begin. For us, however, heading back to town was a trivial non-issue, as we'd already set up several beacons that'd facilitate the process. Specifically, we'd placed one at the inn and several others just outside the city. Thanks to that, we'd be able to keep training until the very moment we needed to show up in person.

That said, we did have something to do prior to actually heading back, so it wasn't like we could just spend the whole four days wandering. Specifically, Fran and I had been planning on setting up an addition beacon inside Rumina's room, as it'd make visiting her much more convenient.

We'd spent some time experimenting with the Beacon spell in order to figure out its limitations. It turned out that we could only actually have 8 active beacons at any given point in time. The skill followed a first in first out methodology, as creating a 9th beacon would immediately cause the 1st we made to disappear. Moreover, its range wasn't actually unlimited. Beacons would only remain active so long as they were within a radius of about 10 kilometers.

Now, one might wonder how exactly we managed to figure out that 10km was our upper limit. The answer to that question was actually a rather simple one; we had Urushi grab a rock with a beacon on it and just run off into the sunset. We made him keep going until we could no longer pick up on the beacon's signal.

We also discovered that Dimension Gate's mana consumption varied with the amount of distance between it and its target. It normally ate up about 100 mana, but could consume up to 500 if we tried to jump a whole 10 km in one go.

I'd originally been expecting to be able to use the spell to teleport back and forth between Barbra and Alessa, but that unfortunately didn't actually seem all that practical. That said, it could potentially be possible if we set up a whole slew of beacons along the way and warped between them till we hit our destination. Fortunately, that issue wasn't one we had to consider when contemplating whether or not we'd be able to tele into Rumina's room, as we'd only need to set a single beacon for it to be in range.

And so, with a clearly defined goal in mind, we spent the rest of our day grinding our way down into the dungeon's depths. It was already our third time through, and we'd already committed all the traps to memory, so it'd ended up turning quite the easy excursion.



The manner in which Rumina greeted us this time around was completely different than it'd been just yesterday. Moreover, her expression was bright, and her skin, which'd been a bit darker than usual, had reverted to its usual shade. I was glad to see that she was in good health, and that the light had returned to her eyes.

"Welcome. And for what purpose should I attribute your visit to on this fine day?"

"Wanted to ask favour."

[You see...]

I told her about the Beacon spell we'd recently obtained, and asked if we could put one in her room in order to make it easier for us to visit.

"I mind it not at all. In fact, I would have very much wanted for you to place one in my place of residence."

[Would have?]

"The answer to that question shall come to you should you make an attempt. Fret not, no harm shall come to you in the process."

She seemed rather convinced that we'd fail, and implied it in her speech. However, we decided to give it a shot anyways since she affirmed it wasn't dangerous.

[Beacon.]

I placed a beacon on the floor in one of the room's corners and in doing so, made it so I'd be able to teleport back.

[Alright, let's head back up a few floors.]

"Nn."

We made our way back up to the dungeon's 14th floor before attempting to activate Dimension Gate — only to have the spell totally fizz out and fail despite consuming mana.

I could still feel the beacon we'd set, and Rumina's room was naturally still in memory, so I didn't really see why the skill would fail to function. We'd fulfilled all its conditions, after all.

I purposefully activated the skill several times, but to no avail. It was never capable of doing much besides just fizzing away.

"Not working?"

[Yeah. It looks like something's preventing the skill from actually activating.]

The sensation I felt was fairly similar to the one I had when we were stuck inside Rynford's barrier. It was like something was getting in the way and interrupting the skill before it went off. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to discern exactly what that something was, nor even really sense its identity or location despite the fact that I could feel it interfering with the casting process.

Going back and checking in with Rumina allowed me to verify that I'd been in the right.

"It appears that you were unable to break past the Goddess' barrier."

Her words made me realize that her having a barrier of some sort should've been something I'd taken as a given from the very start.

Dungeons were supposed to be extremely difficult to conquer. Even something like a D ranked dungeon could lead to a whole slew of casualties. Higher ranking adventurers were generally better at eluding death, but even they could meet their ends if they got caught off guard by traps, or ran into a magic beast that just happened to be able to take advantage of their weaknesses.

That, of course, naturally begged a question: what was the most risk free way for one to conquer a dungeon? I was sure that many would claim that it'd best be done by training up one's detection based skills, joining balanced parties or bringing a ton of potions, but none of those answers were in fact correct.

The simplest and safest way to conquer a dungeon was to not conquer a dungeon in what you'd call a traditional manner.

I could imagine a whole slew of methods that worked off that precise paradigm of thought. You could teleport into the core room, blast magic into said room from afar, or pull off many other similar tricks that'd allow you to destroy the dungeon's core without having to go through a series of challenges.

Though the methods I imagined had many strict requirements, they were by no means unrealistic. Teleporting directly into a dungeon's core room sounded like something that was honestly quite easy so long as one maxed out Dimension Magic and threw in a magic item or two for a bit of extra assistance.

Plus, it wasn't like you could just not take the fact that Godblades existed into account. Godblades were known for their incredible power, and frankly, they seemed like items that could defy what one viewed as common sense altogether. Meltdown no longer existed, but its title had implied that it was a nothing less than a veritable nuke, a weapon of mass destruction that was most likely capable of completely wiping a dungeon and everything around it off the map with ease.

I thought it seemed fairly logical for dungeons to have defensive mechanisms built in to prevent scenarios like that from happening. Dungeons more or less seemed to be equivalent to trials imposed by the Gods, so there was no way for them to not have mechanisms that would prevent you from totally cheating your way through them.

The barrier being something created by a God only made the fact that I couldn't sense it all the more understandable as well.

"I advise you attempt placing the beacon just outside my room instead."

[Iunno if that's the best place for it. Someone might accidentally blow it up while fighting a boss or something.]

We couldn't put it on any floor above the boss floor either, seeing as how people might see us using the gate and whatnot.

"Am I correct in assuming that it will function so long as the barrier does not prevent your spell from activating?"

"Nn."

"In that case, I ask that you wait while I make accommodations."

Rumina headed deeper inside her chambers and didn't come out until after we'd heard the sound of something heavy scraping against something else of equal mass.

A brand new corridor had spawned along a nearby wall.

"I thank you for your patience. The room that lies beyond this corridor is outside of the core room's territory, and thus, is treated as any other one of the dungeon's rooms would be. It will be possible for you to teleport inside of it."

Rumina had made use of her Dungeon Master abilities in order to create a brand new room.

Man, that's a Dungeon Master for you. She and I think on totally different scales.

"Thanks."

"You need not thank me. As I stated prior to your excursion, our wills had happened to align. I too wish for it to be easier for you to visit."

We ran a second experiment and confirmed that Rumina had been spot on.

The inn we were staying at was rather close to the dungeon, so placing a beacon in Rumina's newly created room had made it super convenient for us to go back and forth between the two locations with ease. Moreover, it was basically impossible for anyone to catch us in the act. We'd ran into a few unexpected mishaps along the way, but ultimately accomplished our goal and met every single requirement we'd set for it along the way.

"Please, visit as you see fit. I will welcome you at any time."

"Nn."

[Alright, see ya. We'll make sure to stop by.]



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